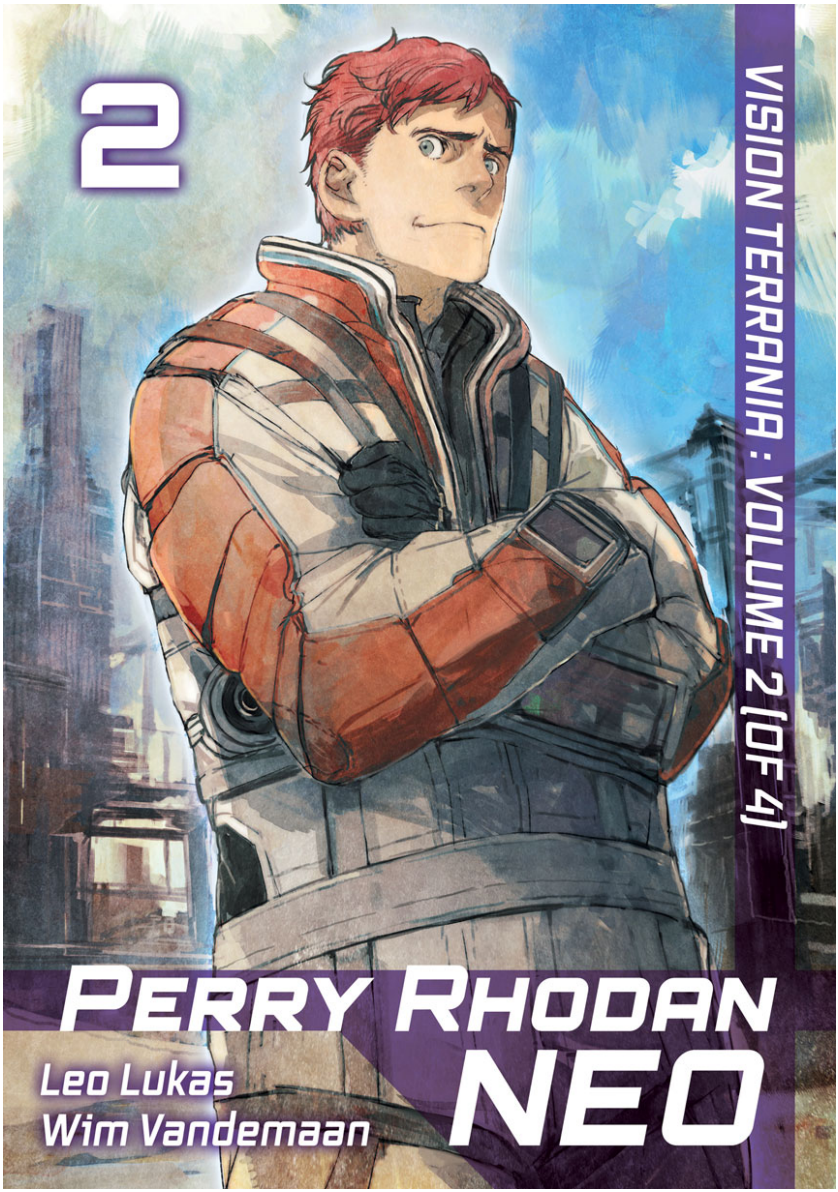
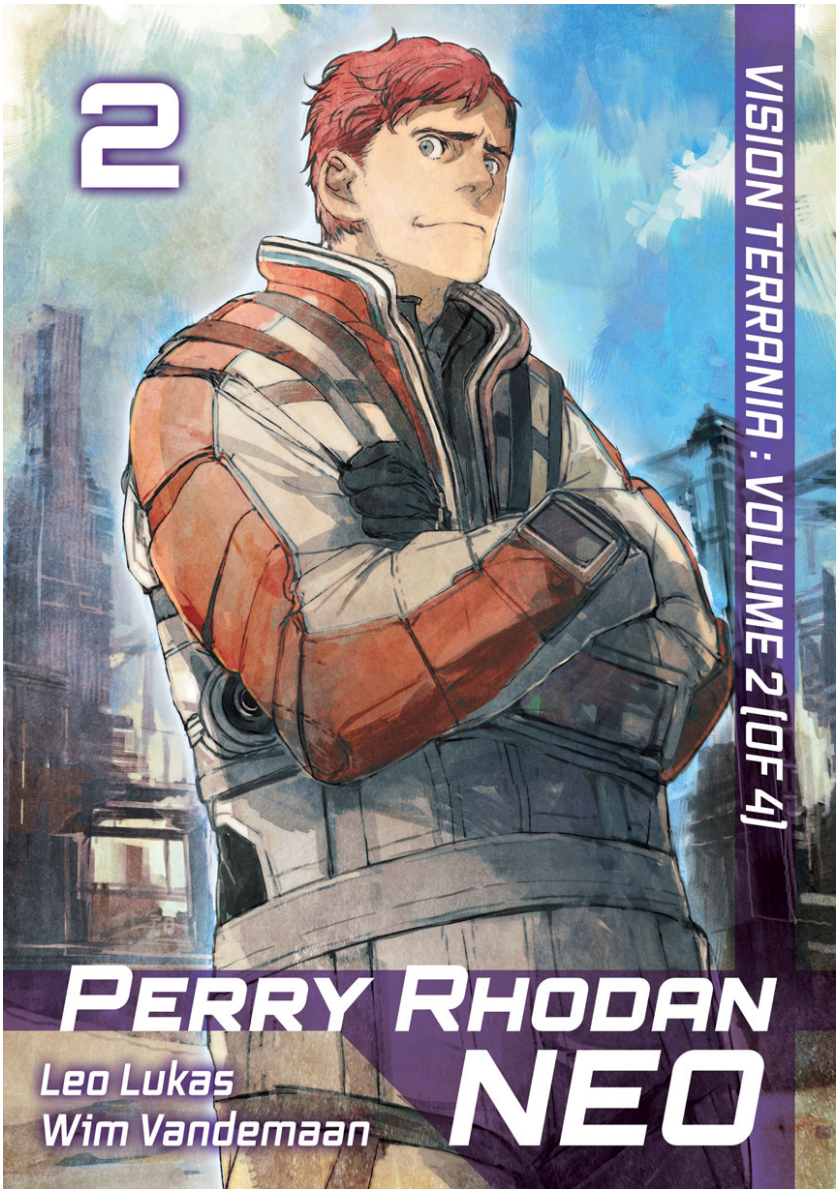

2
VISION TERRANIA : VOLUME 2 [OF 4]
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Leo Lukas
Wim Vandemaan

Perry Rhodan NEO: Volume 2 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10
11. Part 11
12. Part 12


2
VISION TERRANIA : VOLUME 2 [OF 4]
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Episode 3: The Teleporter

By Leo Lukas

You may say I'm a dreamer.

But I'm not the only one.

(John Lennon, “Imagine”)

Prologue

The Ambush

Imagine a ghost appeared before you. Three of them all at once, in fact; one of them bleeding.

You're staying in one of those interchangeable rooms in one of those interchangeable hotels in one of those interchangeable commuter towns, you've just gobbled up the last remaining chocolate in the minibar, and now you're surfing the web a little in the hope that you'll soon be tired enough to sleep. It's not even 7 p.m. yet, but you have to head out very early tomorrow, and you need to be well rested.

This whole routine is nothing new to you. In the worst case, you'll take a sleeping pill at around eight, washing it down with a glass of overpriced red wine chilled in an ice bucket. You'd rather avoid that if possible, though. The stuff gives you heartburn.

Anyway, you're lying in bed, in underpants and a T-shirt. Your suit is hanging neatly in the closet, with the shirt removed from your suitcase and hung up in the shower cubicle. It's an old trick of traveling salesmen and performers: first let the shower run on full heat to build up steam, then hang up your shirt and let the creases vanish. Both easier and more effective than ironing.

You've pulled up your knees, and your tablet is balanced on your thighs. You're skimming through the latest sports updates. Your team lost again. Not good, since that gets you worked up rather than relaxing you. So you switch over to politics; meaningless babble almost always does the trick.

Only, chaos has taken over on that front. The commentators are outdoing themselves with dramatic phrases. If they're to be believed, it's just a matter of time until a global war breaks out, and the only open question is where it'll start. Taiwan? The Middle East? Central Africa? Or even on the Moon?

Contact has been lost with all three superpowers' lunar bases. What's going on up there? Why aren't we hearing anything from the American recon mission led by Major Perry Rhodan anymore? The government spokespeople are accusing each other of sabotage and threatening retaliatory strikes on different fronts. Not that all this military saber-rattling and journalist scaremongering is shocking news. It's been going on for weeks and months. Still, it's hard to be sufficiently bored by it. War on the Moon?

Time for the hardcore option. Culture. A review of a classical concert at the Metropolitan Opera. Haydn's "Surprise Symphony." Perfect. The page has barely even loaded before you start yawning. You stretch out cozily...

Sparks fly throughout the room. A torrent of hot air washes over you, as if the AC suddenly decided to drastically change its function. A short circuit? You drop the tablet, throw yourself to the side, and pull the bedsheet up over your head. Laughable and embarrassing. Useless, in any case, if the AC really does explode.

When you peer out again, you see them. The ghosts—all three of them. They're standing in the middle of the room even though you locked the door. The panes of the windows, which can't be opened anyway, remain unscathed.

"Get lost!" a voice screeches.

It comes from the direction of a pistol aimed right at you. You struggle to control your bowels. Weapons have that effect on people who aren't often confronted with them.

Your thoughts trip over themselves. The gun is a Glock, used by police in these parts. Semiautomatic, twelve shots. Highly dependable, they say. The person holding it is a youth, a fat Latino with greasy black hair. He's wearing something that looks like a homemade space suit. Your panic rises dramatically. The boy looks crazy, out of control, completely unpredictable. Sparks dance in his eyes.

"You can...can have everything," you stammer. "My wallet is—"

“Are you deaf? Get out of here!”

You roll out of the bed, stumble over to the closet, yank your pants from the hanger and pull them on. Your foot gets caught on the inner lining, so you hop on one leg, just barely keeping your balance.

The girl accompanying the Latino only has one hand. Her left arm ends in a stump. She’s tiny, fragile; a crippled child. But the look in her eye is more like that of a wise old witch. Her compassionate gaze almost makes you more afraid than the guy with the gun.

And the third...

His clothes are soaked with blood, and a dark red puddle is forming around his shoes. He’s markedly older and about as average as they come. He doesn’t match the two freaks propping him up. His eyelids flicker. He’s fighting to remain conscious.

“Sorry,” he chokes out, barely comprehensible. “We need your room. Please go. Take all your things, and don’t raise the alarm just yet.”

His politeness is the final straw. You grab your belongings and stumble out of the hotel room, along the hallway, and into the elevator.

You’ve driven over forty miles, as if on autopilot, by the time you park your car in a motel parking lot. After the second cup of coffee, you finally calm down enough to consider whether to inform the authorities.

Later, much later, you’ll discover that you had a short, sweet brush with history in the making. You were involved in a historical event, right there, as an eyewitness. You’ll still be boring your great-grandchildren with this story one day.

“There he stood before, close enough to touch—John Marshall, staggering, deathly pale. Then he slowly slumped forwards...”

1.

Buildings Made of Sand

June 30, 2036

Out of the dust grew a city. A city the likes of which this world had never seen before.

“Steel worker bees,” said Reginald Bull. “Pretty fun to watch them go at it, huh?”

Perry Rhodan expressed no disagreement. The Arkonide robots were scurrying back and forth across the desert floor at tremendous speed. As if they had magic wands in place of gripper arms, they transformed sand into viable structures and barren land into architecture. The results looked alien, yes, but also shockingly familiar; it seemed coherent. Compellingly *logical*.

The two friends were standing on the flat roof of the highest building so far, wondering at the rapid progress. In a dozen places, shafts rose into the sky as if carried by invisible strings, eventually forming suspended ceilings and glass facades.

“Great name, by the way,” Bull continued. “‘Terrania,’ I mean. Whether the invitation to come to Terrania will attract the right people is anyone’s guess. You’ve cast the line; now we have to hope we can reel them in.”

“Everything’s open to us at last,” said Rhodan quietly. “Infinite possibilities. The cosmos have opened a window for us after all this time.”

“And could shut it again just as quickly.”

“Which is why we have to seize this chance.”

He hadn’t hesitated for an instant nor was he still coming to terms with the situation. Perry Rhodan was absolutely convinced that he had done the right thing. To him, the thirty-seven years of

his life so far had all served one purpose: to bring him here, to this place, this turning point in human history.

"I'm with you. And there's no going back now."

"No, there's no going back."

Bull gestured towards the building site, which by now covered almost the entire area under the defensive dome measuring about a kilometer across.

"A round central plaza with orbital roads forming circular segments. Spaciously laid out, not strictly symmetrical but still following clear principles. Did Crest draw up this master plan?"

"He's playing a major role. He wanted Terrania to bring together the best ideas from Arkonide and human architecture. He's meticulously studying all the aerial shots taken by the external cameras during our descent." Rhodan abruptly turned 180 degrees and headed back to the staircase. "I'd better check on him." He suddenly had a bad feeling.

His best friend scurried after him, without a word of complaint for once. They walked in silence, each lost in his own thoughts. Three days had passed since the *Stardust* had touched down in the Gobi Desert. Three days that had changed the world...

At ground level, they were met by Dr. Eric Manoli. His expression confirmed to Rhodan that his hunch hadn't deceived him.

"Crest's not doing too well," said the doctor. He spoke as calmly and collectedly as ever, but the urgency behind his words was clear. "He has an infection caused by Earth's pathogens. The defensive shield on his formchair has been repaired by the robots now, but he must have been infected in the hours it was down."

Bull swore. "That's all we need."

"What's your prognosis, Eric?" Rhodan asked.

"It's serious. Our alien benefactor was already weakened by his

leukemia. With the current state of his immune system…"

"No details. Can you heal him? Or stabilize him, at least?"

"I'm afraid not. We left our mobile infirmary behind on the Moon, as you know. What little we have on the *Stardust* won't be enough."

"Meaning?"

"Crest needs urgent medical care. Care we can't give him here. Otherwise he'll die."

Bull swore again.

Perry Rhodan immediately grasped the severity of the situation. Crest was the key, the most powerful ace up their sleeve. The only one, essentially.

If the Arkonide succumbed to infection, any chance of securing his people's toweringly superior technology for humanity would die with him. Worst: Thora da Zoltral, commander of the *Aetron*, the gigantic spherical starship sitting on the Moon, loved Crest like a father. He had taken her into his household—adopted her, in human terms. The pain of losing him could be too much for her and lead to a knee-jerk reaction.

Rhodan was sure the proud, impulsive Arkonide would blame humanity for Crest's death and punish them for it without mercy. She had proven that she wasn't squeamish, especially not with people she classed as primitive savages. Before she'd brought herself to at least describe Rhodan and Bull as "barbarians," she'd repeatedly called them merely "animals."

In his mind's eye, an avenging angel appeared, a supernaturally beautiful, golden-eyed, white-haired figure who bore down on the Earth—on *Terra*—with all the monstrous weaponry the *Aetron* had to offer. There was probably nothing and no one on this planet that could withstand her rage.

He shooed away the image as he, Manoli, and Bull hurried to

Crest's quarters.

The old Arkonide had visibly lost weight. "Greetings," he said, weakly raising his hand. "How are things outside?"

"The Chinese troops have blocked off the landing site and are laying siege to us," Bull replied. "They're keeping quiet for the most part, but I have reason to believe they're digging tunnels. Their goal is to come up from underneath us."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that. The energy shield is spherical and reaches underground. Their primitive weapons can't break through it. Perry Rhodan, I've struck upon some interesting historical parallels. Your city planners have by no means relied on nothing but rectangular grids. There have been plenty of valiant attempts at other forms of urban planning, albeit with restrictions due to the inferior building materials available. Still, the *idea* of a vertical garden city has..." His voice petered out and he gasped for air, wheezing pitifully.

"That's not our biggest concern right now."

Rhodan felt great sympathy for the alien, who on the surface seemed so astonishingly human-like—*human*, even—and yet was foreign, more so than any other person on the planet. It broke his heart to see Crest da Zoltral in such a terrible state. The albino-like alien's red eyes watered when his emotions flared up even slightly, which had already happened. A fire gleamed in those eyes, an immense hunger for life, knowledge, and advancement. His body, however, couldn't keep pace with his thirst for action, which his contact with the Terran astronauts might have fueled even further. The same fire that blazed in Crest's spirit was visibly wearing down his body more and more.

"You have to take it easy," Rhodan insisted. "Your wellbeing has top priority."

He exchanged a glance with Eric Manoli. Slowly, the doctor shook his head. *Nothing we can do*, the gesture said.

“Bridges,” Crest breathed. “Bridges should span between the towers, uniformly reflecting the ground-level layout in the third dimension. As soon as I’m feeling better, I’ll sketch out the ideal proportions for you.”

“I understand. Yes, that sounds like a fantastic idea. It’s exactly what we’ll do. Terrania will be the most beautiful and livable city there ever was. But for now, rest up, my friend.”

The Arkonide’s eyelids drooped. His chest rose and fell almost imperceptibly.

Manoli reached toward Crest’s wrist to take his pulse. Halfway there, he stopped and shrugged his shoulders in resignation. “We don’t actually know the acceptable range for his species. Either way, his condition’s critical. The illness is causing him to lose touch with reality.”

“I’ve noticed.” Rhodan took a deep breath. “I’ll contact Thora.”

It wasn’t an easy decision.

Presumably, the Arkonide would consider her prejudices against Earth and humanity to have been confirmed, and would insist on bringing her mentor back to the *Aetron*. Then Crest would be lost, and not only as an ace up his sleeve in dealing with her.

On the other hand, they needed Thora’s help. No matter what, Rhodan had to convince her that Crest could only be saved in a clinic on earth, and that as such, they needed her support to break through the Chinese army’s siege.

Tense all over, he activated the com link. However, it wasn’t Thora’s image that appeared on the monitor but that of another Arkonide. He seemed indifferent and distracted, not even looking into the camera. Instead, he looked off at an angle with half-closed eyes.

“What?”

“Perry Rhodan from Earth. I wish to speak with your

commander."

"Not possible right now. Call back later."

"Wait! It's a serious matter regarding Crest da Zoltral, and it's urgent. Please, I must speak to Thora."

"She's busy. Not available."

"How long? Where is she? What's she doing?"

He received no reply. The Arkonide's gaze wandered into the middle distance. The reflections of colorful, flickering lights danced on his pale face.

"Hey! Listen to me! Speak to me! Are you Thora's proxy?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Kemath da Ordsent."

"Great. Kemath. Your commander must have left instructions for how to reach her in case of emergency. This *is* an emergency!"

The Arkonide twisted his mouth into an otherworldly smile. Something had finally distracted him fully, and he turned away from the camera. The image on the monitor disappeared; the connection had been cut. Further calls received no response. The computer was putting him through to Thora's representative, but the alien simply didn't pick up.

With impotent rage, Rhodan balled his hands into fists. The Arkonides' spherical ship was a technical marvel, but the crew was largely unfit for duty. Other than Crest and Thora, they brazenly spent all their time immersed in virtual worlds. As Crest had lamented, neither their mission nor his own suffering had been enough to drag them back to reality for longer than a few moments. And why would they need to when they felt invulnerable and everything in the physical realm ran automatically?

“Forget about those idiots,” Bull snarled. “We’ll have to handle this with the options at our disposal.”

But how? An idea flashed through Rhodan’s mind born out of sheer desperation. “Flipper,” he murmured.

“Clark? What about him?”

“I think it’s his time to shine.”

2.

Echoes of Gunshots

One week earlier

With great effort, John Marshall managed to stay conscious. He was lightheaded; the hotel room spun around him. His vision kept going dark. But he didn't feel any pain. He was in shock, most likely. The blood loss, the many deaths he'd experienced at close-up range—no, even closer than that...

Somebody helped him onto the bed. Sue. Small, crippled, courageous Sue. It was wrong. He was meant to be the *protector*, not the protected. He had the responsibility. *He* took care of the children at the Pain Shelter, not the other way around! He tried to sit up, but Sue softly pushed him back onto the pillow.

"Don't strain yourself," she warned. "You're bleeding heavily. Take it easy, John. Please. Leave it to me."

The weight of her hand shifted to the wound on his leg. It was almost as if she were reaching inside him—a good, startlingly comfortable, warm feeling.

He calmed down. Gradually, his thoughts and perceptions grew clearer. Continuous noise filled the room.

Marshall turned his head. The noise was being caused by Sid, who was barricading the door with all manner of furniture. As he worked, he babbled ceaselessly. Marshall could only make out snatches of his mutterings.

"Never... He won't get me... Not again..."

"Don't be scared," Marshall croaked. "The man won't come back. He's fled in a panic. Far, far away." He knew that with certainty, although he couldn't have said how.

Sid González turned and stared at him with confusion. Marshall

realized that the chubby teenager hadn't meant the hotel guest he'd threatened and scared off. The murdered police officer's weapon hung from his belt.

"Have you put the safety on?"

"Huh? Of course. What do *you* think?" With a jerk, the boy turned back to the dresser and continued to drag it loudly towards the door.

John Marshall closed his eyes. Yes, what *did* he think? Guilt and despair were burning him up inside. He had failed. He hadn't managed to get the situation under control, let alone make the twins, Tyler and Damon, see sense. The two had slipped away from him a long time ago. Otherwise they wouldn't have been hiding assault rifles right under his nose.

Tyler had shot the police officer, Deborah; a good-natured woman with a caring heart towards children, full of understanding. He could always talk to her. And now she was dead. She and her colleagues had been after Sid for attempted bank robbery. Then the situation had escalated because the twins had freaked out and started a firefight.

Marshall could hear, could *feel*, the echoes of the gunshots. The bullet that had hit Deborah in the chest and bored a hole from which her life had ebbed away within seconds. He'd died again in the hail of bullets from the automatic weapons the officers had fired at the shelter. He had felt the projectiles, glowing hot, as they penetrated his thigh, his shoulder, his skull, which had then caved in.

It wasn't until the very end, though, that John himself had actually been hit. He had only imagined the other wounds, "only" experienced them secondhand and yet so very powerfully. How could that have happened? Was he...ill? Mentally disturbed? Was he suffering from hallucinations?

A word formed in his thoughts: *empathy*. It sounded limp to him, not totally inaccurate but too imprecise. Could anyone really have such an extreme sense of empathy? How was it possible?

At the same time, until recently, he'd also thought it impossible that someone could transport themselves to another location miles away in the blink of an eye through sheer power of will. Since then, Sid—shy, pudgy Sid "Spark" González, of all people—had proven many times over that he was capable of this feat that bordered on magic.

"What's happening to us?"

He only realized he'd spoken aloud when Sue replied to him. "You have to go to a hospital."

"No!" howled Sid. "No hospitals. They'll find us there!"

"Can't you see the state John's in? I can't patch him up on my own. Do you want him to bleed to death?"

The sixteen-year-old thought frantically. Beads of sweat on his forehead transformed into sparks. Then he was gone, having vanished without a trace. The room temperature had increased noticeably, however, despite the purring AC unit.

Making no comment on that unbelievable event, Sue stood up, ran into the bathroom, and came back with towels, which she pressed onto Marshall's leg wound.

"You need a pressure bandage. But I can't manage that; there isn't a first aid kit anywhere..."

He struggled to follow the flow of her words. He must have eventually dozed off. An ear-splitting scream woke him. Heat, sparks... Sid was back. He'd brought with him an elderly woman in a white coat. A doctor. Her whole body was trembling, and her eyes were wide with shock. Her scream died away into wheezing.

John Marshall smelled her fear. He could see why this extraordinary experience would have left her hopelessly overwhelmed. But how did he know her name when he couldn't see any name tag?

"Dr. Lowenstein. Diedre," he heard himself murmur, slowly, word by word, in a soothing tone. "This may seem like a nightmare

to you, but it's real. We don't mean you any harm, do you understand? I can explain everything. Most of it, at least. The problem is, I might not have enough time. I'm badly wounded. Please help me."

In the background, Sid reached for the gun. Sue batted his hand away and shook her head. The boy came close to flying off the handle at her, but ultimately he relented.

For now.

Marshall pulled the blood-soaked towels off his lower leg. "I've been shot. You're a doctor. You swore an oath." Speaking cost him a lot of energy, but he couldn't let up now. He sensed that he was on the verge of getting through to her. "Treat me, Diedre. Please. I'm begging you to save my life."

Still trembling, Dr. Lowenstein stepped over to the bed and bent down over him. She didn't ask any questions. Having withdrawn into herself like a sleepwalker, she carefully rolled up the leg of his pants and inspected the wound. Her silvery gray hair was tied into a tight bun held in place with a wooden clasp.

At last she said, "You should be in a hospital."

"Not an option!" Sid cried promptly. "You have to treat him here."

"With my bare hands? I'm not a miracle worker."

Sparks flew. This time it only took a few seconds before the boy returned, now with a medical kit under his arm. He handed it to Dr. Lowenstein.

"This'll have to do."

She ignored Sid, especially his supernatural ability. That was what John Marshall observed—no, *felt*. Her mind suppressed the inexplicable, blocking out the distressing circumstances, and she concentrated purely on her patient. That was for the best. She also didn't raise any objections to Sue sitting on the bed and holding John's hand.

Things were on track to some degree. He gave in to his weakness and drifted off.

After an indeterminate amount of time, John Marshall came to again when the doctor said, “Congratulations. You’re in luck. The bullet went straight through your calf. I’ve cleaned and disinfected the wound and I’ll bandage you up now.”

“Thanks!”

“You also have a remarkable constitution. The wound has started healing shockingly quickly. I’ll leave painkillers and some drugs to support your circulation. The day after tomorrow, at the very latest, you *must* get follow-up treatment at a—”

A knock came at the door.

“Greater Houston Police Department,” came a man’s voice from outside. “Open up!”

Sid González drew the pistol.

“No, don’t!” Marshall whispered. “For God’s sake, think about what happened at the shelter. Don’t make the same mistake as the twins!”

“I repeat, open up!” came the muffled yet unmistakable demand through the barricaded door. “We have the building surrounded! It’s no use trying to resist. Don’t do anything stupid!”

“You’ll never get me,” Sid snarled, mostly to himself. “Never!” A sharp click sounded as he released the safety catch on the weapon.

“Faster,” Sue urged the doctor. “You have to finish. It’ll be awful otherwise.”

The doorknob was rattled from the other side. “For the last time, open the door! You have ten seconds, then we’re sending in the riot squad. You have no chance.”

Her fingers racing, Dr. Lowenstein wrapped up Marshall’s

throbbing calf. Sid gripped the gun with both hands, straddled his legs, and took up a shooting position. Something heavy banged against the door, which buckled but didn't break. Yet.

Everyone in the room shouted all at once.

"I won't let him get me!"

"Sid, get us out of here!"

"I'm a doctor! I'm innocent!"

"Take cover, Doctor!"

"Take the medical kit!"

Another blow, a powerful one, shook the whole room. The door burst open. Furniture toppled over. Commands were bellowed. The windows shattered, and armed figures in black masks swung through them.

John Marshall braced himself for the worst.

Sparks flew.

In the aftermath, Dr. Diedre Lowenstein was processed by the GHPD. It took quite a while; their officers not only handled her exceptionally rudely but held her and interrogated her for days.

Neither she nor the lawyers on either side even considered that there might have been a connection between the incidents that occurred on the evening of June 23, 2036, and the events that, shortly afterwards, shook a significant sector of the Milky Way. Instead, they argued about procedural errors, haggling over trivial details in their legal skirmishes.

It didn't exactly help that Dr. Lowenstein could offer absolutely no description of her supposed kidnappers, instead maintaining that she had been under the influence of mind-altering drugs. Eventually she came to the realization that she had burned through too much of her inherited wealth, and—despite the protests of her lawyers,

who would gladly have milked her further—agreed to a settlement. From then on, she lived in isolation at a vacation home in Barbados belonging to her family. She strictly refused to follow the news and dedicated herself with great fervor to the breeding of wire-haired dachshunds.

One of the abilities that had brought the species *homo sapiens sapiens* to its dominant position on planet Earth was and always has been the ability to close one's eyes.

3.

The Superior Astronaut

June 30, 2036

Major Michael Freyt was flying to the Moon.

Finally. At long last.

It still gnawed at him that he hadn't been deployed first. Perry Rhodan had been chosen over him. Not because his test results had been better. Quite the opposite! By every individual measure, Freyt came out on top. Every time. Rhodan was just…smarter. Shrewder. He had an aura of being more difficult, more interesting, because he was a greater source of conflict. By rebelling at every opportunity, he drew the spotlight onto himself.

Ha!

Michael Freyt saw straight through his rival. He had since their very first meeting, when they'd all taken the entry exam at the same time and won the top two spots. Freyt ahead of Rhodan, then Reginald Bull tying with William Sheldon. The four of them were from the same cohort, all peas in a pod. Test pilots with a passion, obsessed with space, with IQs far above 130 based on multiple tests.

It had only taken a few days for them to divide up naturally into pairs. Freyt and Sheldon valued tried and true systems, clear guidelines, and military discipline. That was the deciding factor: discipline. Knowing where your allegiances lay. Being conscious of what to do and what not to do. Drilling your body and sharpening your mind. Offering criticism where appropriate, of course. But above all, remaining *grounded*, duty-bound to your country. Being a patriot. An American.

In contrast, Bull had fooled around every chance he'd gotten. He'd also dreamed about stars that he'd never reach by any reasonable estimation. Not if the theory of relativity had anything

to say about it, at least.

Perry Rhodan? Rather than reining in his friend, he had only encouraged Bull's pipe dreams. "How can you be an astronaut," he'd said in the mess hall once, "without believing there's no limit to how far we can go? We'll push the limits, then keep pushing harder and harder. To the edge of the universe, and one day even beyond."

"Oh, sure," Bill Sheldon had replied sarcastically, "and all with a six-day air supply."

"Six days," Bull had retorted, raising his whiskey glass, "was enough to create the whole world, according to the Bible. Just give me powerful enough propulsion units and I'll get there faster. Then I can kick back and relax on day seven."

To Freyt, that had been vulgar blasphemy, not to mention nauseatingly boastful.

He brushed the memory aside and checked his instruments. Everything was running like clockwork. His *Starchild* was right on course. In fact, it was following his course a tiny bit more precisely than its sister ship, the *Stardust*, had a few days earlier.

Not that that surprised him. Nor had he been surprised when Lesly K. Pounder, the head of the American space program, had called on him. The old dog had admitted that his initial decision had been the wrong one.

"I won't beat around the bush, Major. You already know what happened with Team Alpha."

"Rhodan and Bull screwed up royally."

"I wouldn't describe it in exactly those terms, especially since we can't see the outcome yet, but…the president wants you to course-correct with Team Beta. So get you and your men ready for launch. You're setting out as soon as arrangements are made."

Freyt had saluted.

Shortly afterwards, the president of the United States, Stanley Drummond, had personally received him in a room adjoining the Oval Office.

"The fate of our homeland is resting on your shoulders, Major Freyt," he'd said in his soft, assured, authoritative manner. "You're aware of that?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"I expected nothing less. Now, listen. The commotion caused by Rhodan, Bull, and company is neither pleasant nor desirable, but it's also secondary. True, the global conflict continues to escalate. Rhodan apparently had no better plan than landing in Chinese territory. Still, the Gobi is no more than a sideshow. According to my intelligence, there's only *one* alien there, and he's not in the best of health. A few technological contraptions too, maybe, but no more. Appealing, sure, but I don't want the consolation prize for our American homeland. I want the jackpot!"

Freyt had understood right away. "The alien ship. On the moon."

"Smart boy." The president had patted him on the cheek. "So, you'll go to the Moon and bring that precious jewel to me? To our great country, I mean, of course?"

"Sir, I'll do my best."

"I will note," Drummond had said, wearing his most radiant election campaign smile, "my advisors have warned me not to underestimate these aliens. I must be vigilant. The very fact that their technology is enough for Rhodan to hold out against the almost inexhaustible Chinese forces... The point is, we *need* to gain the Arkonides' technological advancements for our country. This world has a right to be governed by the best people—in other words, by us. Or are you entertaining any doubts?"

"Not in the least, sir."

"Excellent. I knew I could count on you. To turn it around, that

means the following: if you see no chance of taking the ship in the name of the United States, you must destroy it. That way, it won't fall into an enemy power's clutches, at least. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

"Sir?"

Drummond had leaned forward. "We're outfitting you with a nuclear bomb," he whispered, so intimately that a shiver had run down Freyt's spine. "In your space suit. If you reach the conclusion that your primary mission is a bust, trigger the bomb. That will require you to sacrifice yourself. Bitter, but you can console yourself with the knowledge that your name will be celebrated thousands of years from now. Whereas no one will remember a thing about the traitor known as Perry Rhodan..."

That was how it had gone. A beautiful moment; a moment of satisfaction.

Major Michael Freyt assured himself one more time that his *Starchild* was on course. It was. No deviations whatsoever.

Everything was right. Every detail fit perfectly. It wasn't a dream either—or rather, it was one that was finally coming true after all these years. The toil and hardship had paid off. He was really and truly flying to the Moon.

Just three more days and he would reach his goal.

At last!

4.

One of Five

July 1, 2036

At around two in the morning, the decision was made. Crests's health had declined even further. The Arkonide was still conscious, but his appearance! Deathly pale with sunken cheeks—a living corpse.

Dr. Eric Manoli confirmed Perry Rhodan's impression: their alien guest wouldn't hold out much longer. A few days, maybe. A week or two at most. His immune system wasn't capable of staving off the infections that a human would have beaten with no difficulty.

Despite his weakness, Crest had tried to contact the *Aetron*'s crew many times. Just once, he had succeeded in speaking to Kemath da Ordsent, but only briefly. Thora's representative had languidly brushed him off, just as he had ignored Rhodan's earlier plea. The commander was unavailable, he'd insisted. *We're unable to take your call right now; please wait patiently until the person you're seeking is able to respond to your concerns.*

Then Kemath had drifted back into his virtual world and cut off the com link.

"I don't get it," Reginald Bull ranted. "The most important guy on their expedition is at death's door, and these brain-dead, snot-nosed game addicts still can't get their asses in gear." He slapped a hand against his forehead. "They can't even be bothered to alert their commander!"

"Which leaves us no other choice than to go ahead with our plan," replied Rhodan.

"I don't like it." With his boot, Bull kicked against the empty shell of a building the two friends had come to for a final

discussion.

“There’s only one way Crest can survive, and that’s if he’s taken to a properly equipped clinic,” Rhodan said. “Asking Bai Jun for more medical equipment is not an option. Since Flipper’s escape attempt, the Chinese general knows we’re having internal difficulties. He’s a clever man; I’m sure he won’t help us out any further when he can let us stew in our own juices instead.”

“We’ve been over that already, and it all makes sense. What bothers me is the role you have planned for Clark Flipper. Don’t get me wrong, I think the world of our crewmate. He’s a good man. But he’s in a bad place mentally because of his missing girlfriend, and that makes him unreliable. On top of that, he’s struggling to come to terms with you, me, and Eric having shifted our loyalty from the US to all of humanity.”

Rhodan nodded. “We’re not Americans anymore,” he reasserted. “Viewing ourselves as members of a nation state would be laughable small-minded considering we’ve opened the door to the stars—even if only slightly. We are *Terrans*.”

“Noble words. Write them down for any future historians in case we ever reach a point where we can tell our story. For now, the tiniest mistake could throw us off track. And I still say it’s risky in the extreme to trust Flipper with one of our five”—Bull raised his right hand and waved his fingers theatrically—“I repeat, *five* Arkonide battledresses. These things can—”

“We both know what they’re capable of.”

“Do you also know what it means from a strategic point of view?”

“Yes, dammit!”

The suits Thora that had given them were, as of now, the most powerful devices on the planet. No conventional weapon could penetrate their high-energy defensive shield. The in-built propulsion units could achieve a top speed of just under Mach 1 with a maneuverability that no human-made aircraft could hope to

compete with. The battledresses offered their wearers breathtaking abilities.

“Every stealth engineer on Earth would give their left nut for the camouflage function alone,” Bull insisted. “Even without offensive weaponry, a kit like that essentially makes you invincible. And we only have—”

“Five of them. I get it, okay? You don’t need to keep reminding me.”

Bull raised his eyebrows and shrugged with his arms wide apart. “And you still want to hand one of them over to Flipper? Our buddy Clark Flipper, who’s still wearing the Stars and Stripes on his shoulder? What if he makes a beeline straight for the nearest American outpost?”

“He won’t.”

“So he says.”

“He won’t, because the battledress is his only realistic chance to track down Beth in the Himalayas. That’s more important to him than anything else. And for that, I’ll gladly give him the fancy space suit.”

“You are… We’ve known each other so long now, but I have no idea what you are, Perry Rhodan. A fool, a romantic…”

“A realist, Reg. I believe in the good in people.”

Bull rolled his eyes.

They went back to Crest.

“It’s time to head out, my friend,” said Rhodan. “Dr. Manoli will accompany you and do his best to take care of you.”

“I know. I trust him just as much as I trust you.”

“About the specifics of the plan…”

“I’ve memorized them all. Don’t be deceived by my…noticeably diminished…physical form. There’s still a young mind living in this old skull.” The Arkonide moved his hand but ultimately had to let it drop long before it reached his skull. “You’ll be amazed when I…” A coughing fit swallowed up the rest.

Crest spat blood. Manoli helped him to remain standing with one hand, then with the other clapped him cautiously on the back in a harrowingly futile gesture. “There isn’t much time,” the doctor said curtly.

Flipper hovered in, wearing the Arkonide battledress and already fully accustomed to it. The suit’s cut was reminiscent of protective sports gear, like that a footballer would wear. Clearly visible plates appeared to widen the torso. The helmet was transparent, with an anti-reflective coating so effective that it was barely visible at all.

Based on how elegantly he sat down beside Crest’s formchair, Clark Flipper had made good use of the hours he’d spent training with the suit.

“I have to say,” he declared cheerfully, “I’ve never been a fan of overbearing user interfaces, but this thing reacts to every little move I make. I hardly have to give it any verbal instructions at all.”

Bull cast a meaningful glance at Rhodan. *Even a more stable character could fall prey to its luster,* his look seemed to say.

Despite this, Rhodan stuck to his guns. “Clark. Eric. We all know that the situation is balanced on a knife’s edge. The fate of our world is on your shoulders. I wholeheartedly believe that you’ll prove yourselves worthy of that responsibility.”

“Amen,” said Bull.

Manoli clapped himself on the chest with a wink. “Besides, I have my lucky charm. Nothing can go wrong.” He slipped into the second of the two suits, which weighed around fifty kilograms with the anti-grav disabled.

Rhodan and Bull helped their extraterrestrial acquaintance don

the third suit. Crest da Zoltral's limbs felt like they were made of paper and could break under the slightest pressure. Or burst into flames. His skin was burning, his whole body radiating heat like a faulty oven about to explode.

Crest tried to speak several times before he finally managed coherent syllables. "We'll see each other again, Perry Rhodan. I'm tough, and you're canny. You also have the rare gift of rallying like-minded people around you, entirely without petty jealousies. That will get you far."

"I don't know what to say to that."

"Then just silently accept it." The body of the terminally ill Arkonide was shaken by a cramp before Crest could muster another remark. "Take my multi-beamer, Perry. As you know, no earthly firearm can come close to matching it, and Thora only allowed us to take one."

Rhodan thought it over, torn between emotion and rationality. "No. Keep the ray gun. You might need it more than I do."

"You could use it to drastically reduce the besiegers' numbers," Crest said. "You can spread the beam very widely. It will still wipe out everything it touches."

"Tantalizing, but I'll only kill in self-defense. Those are humans out there. They may have signed up to be soldiers of their own free will, but in this conflict they're still as innocent as newborn babes. I'm not going to slaughter innocents."

Crest tilted his head. "I'm glad I wasn't wrong about you, Perry Rhodan of Terra. Good luck."

"Those were going to be my parting words too."

"Keep learning, Rhodan. You have an admirably quick perception, and that's why you're destined to lead your kind to the stars. Never forget, though, that many other people, good people, started out from the same point and still faltered along the way."

“Keep learning, Rhodan,” said Bull in imitation of the Arkonide as the motley trio shot into the sky in their battledresses. “Great advice. Who are we supposed to be learning from? He’s the only mentor who’s ever wound up in our obscure corner of the Milky Way, and there he goes.”

“Calm down, all right? Even if Flipper and Manoli don’t pull through, there’s still the *Aetron*. There’s still Thora.”

“Sure, but she can’t come to the phone right now.” He spat out the words like lemon seeds.

“For now, maybe.”

Manoli, Flipper, Crest, the three of them doubly camouflaged, could no longer be seen with the naked eye. But would the deception work once they’d left the dome behind?

“Hey, Perry,” Bull mused, “you don’t happen to be flirting with the idea that you might win this chick over, do you?”

“Thora? Are you insane?” The idea wouldn’t have occurred to Rhodan in a million years. “Our interests align, or at least a small subset of them. That’s all I’m pinning my hopes on. Admittedly, we have established an ability to communicate, and… Ow!”

Bull had given him a clap on the shoulder so violent that he lost his balance for a moment.

“An ability to communicate?” his best friend scoffed. “You should hear yourself, man. Let me tell you what’s *really* going on here: you’ve got yourself a crush on this vicious alien Amazon! You believe, in all seriousness, that you have a real chance with Thora!”

“Act your age, all right? This isn’t some love story about a man and a woman who grew up thousands of light-years apart. By the way, you might want to open up a hole before our friends smash against the inside of the defensive shield.”

“It’s all under control. Crest told me exactly what to do.” Bull

glanced at the readings on the device he held in his left hand. His lips silently counted along with it, then he flicked a switch. “They’re through,” he said at last.

Shortly afterwards, heavy fire told them that the breakout attempt had been noticed. Since that meant there had to be a gap in the shield, the Chinese were trying to make use of it. But it was too late; the activation and deactivation had been planned down to the second. By now, the energy shield was already fully closed and barely flickering, just like before. The besiegers continued to fruitlessly fire their weapons for another minute or so, and the inside of the dome boomed and vibrated as if they were inside a bell. Then the racket died down as quickly as it had begun. Instead, a squadron of fighter jets whooshed past the shield and disappeared to the south.

“We could have done that part in our sleep,” said Bull dryly. “The rest is up to our friends. Give me five, buddy.”

Rhodan didn’t leave his friend hanging, quickly returning his high five. “We only have one chance, and it’s a small one.”

“But we won’t waste it,” Bull replied with grim determination.

They gazed upward into the night sky above the Gobi Desert. Thanks to all the light from their besiegers’ camp, only the brightest stars were visible.

The Arkonides come from somewhere out there, thought Rhodan. *Somewhere out there is our future.*

“Either we soar to unimaginable heights,” growled Bull, “or we fall into obscurity. Our fate is written in the stars.”

“We’ll find out soon enough. That much is certain.”

They went back to their temporary quarters, lay down, and tried to sleep.

5.

Run Over

June 23 to 27, 2036

The bungalow was luxuriously furnished. At least, it had been once. Up until a decade or two ago when the hurricanes got stronger every summer and autumn, chasing away even the most stubborn inhabitants of Matagorda Bay.

On the shelf above the bed John Marshall was lying in, a dusty teddy bear was standing guard over a handful of children's books. Faded posters and empty picture frames hung on the walls, covered in cobwebs.

Even though the bungalow's former owners would probably never return, Marshall felt like an intruder. This musty bed, the tattered books, and the scruffy bear had meant something to a child who had long since grown up by now. The room, and the whole house, represented a private, intimate sphere, and violating that hurt him almost on a physical level. Especially since, when the painkillers took effect, he was haunted by dreams so realistic that he jolted awake every time. It was as if memories were hanging in the air, or perhaps somewhere in the ether beyond the realm of conventional perception. Ghostly memories just waiting for someone like him to absorb them: the pride of a son catching a long pass thrown by his father for the first time—and the father's far greater pride in his boy, as well as his bitterness that the mother didn't share in the manly euphoria and passion for football.

Marshall tossed and turned on the damp bedsheets, oscillating between dreams and reality. He knew he was being afflicted by symptoms of the healing process, by side effects of the medicine from the kit that Sue had grabbed just before their haphazard escape. With sparks flying around him, Sid González had taken them and...how to describe it?

Run?

Jumped?

Had Sid *carried* himself and his companions? *Teleported* them?

Signs and wonders were occurring. In the phases he spent free of the fever and the sedation, John Marshall fought to understand what was happening to him and around him. There was Sid, who was so afraid of an ominous stalker that he had broken through time and space to escape the phantom figure. There was Sue, whose mere touch triggered incredible growth and healing. Then there was Marshall himself, who was continually discovering more about other people than he was comfortable with and had no way to stop it.

There was something about the times they were living in. Recent developments were culminating, building to a fever pitch. Natural events were competing with one another, scrambling over each other with destructive intensity as if trying to prove some ancient prophecy. Man-made systems were acting alongside them. The financial markets whose mechanisms Marshall knew so well from his former life as an investment banker were in a state of disarray that could herald their total dissolution. The entire system was on the verge of imploding. Nothing mattered anymore. And there was so much talk of an imminent Third World War that it seemed only a matter of time.

In this crumbling world, John Marshall had tried to lend a hand to a few particularly vulnerable young people. He'd given them a refuge, a home: the Pain Shelter. Now it was more of a crime scene than a safe harbor. What would become of the remaining children? It tormented him that he couldn't help them. But he was too weak; he *had been* too weak.

The bitter irony was that there had finally been a glimmer of hope on the horizon. It had arrived in the form of a strange old man with a British accent whose shabby tailor-made suit had only emphasized his conspicuous hunch rather than concealing it. His business card was still in the breast pocket of Marshall's shirt. "Homer G. Adams," it read. "CEO, General Cosmic Company." And a phone number with an area code that Marshall didn't recognize. Only eccentrics still used business cards these days.

This Adams had offered to financially support the shelter. He'd claimed to be filthy rich, and to prove it, had paid off the foundation's debts in one go, down to the exact cent. Remembering it gave Marshall goosebumps. The old man had promised more money, all of it from legal sources, he had insisted. Money to expand the shelter in exchange for taking in people that he would send to Marshall. Which people, exactly, he hadn't said.

Now none of that would ever happen. Tyler and Damon, the trigger-happy brothers, had put paid to all that. Sid González bore some of the responsibility as well, of course. But most of all, John Marshall blamed himself.

Matagorda Bay was situated about a hundred miles south of Greater Houston. It was an abandoned stretch of land, a disaster zone overrun with rubble, trash, and other relicts of earlier, rosier decades. The electricity and water had probably been switched off long ago.

Sid had brought himself, Sue, and Marshall there in numerous stages. Why he'd chosen this desolate bay was known only to them. The boy had clammed up more than ever. He had grown more dangerous too; Marshall sensed a permanent fear that could turn into blind panic at any moment. What would happen if the sixteen-year-old unleashed the strange powers at his command in a way that he couldn't control?

No one knew.

Sid was a bomb on two legs. A *paranoid* bomb. He did engage in conversation once in a while, out of respect for Marshall, but rational arguments were mostly futile. If Sid felt pushed into a corner, even slightly, the sparks appeared and he was gone.

Neither Marshall, Sue, nor anyone else could stop him.

After days of drifting between dreaming and waking, delirium and distress, John Marshall managed to stand up on his own for the first time. Pulling himself to his feet was a great effort, and the few

steps to the bathroom took half an eternity.

The single-story building was empty. His shouts went unanswered. Eventually, he found Sue behind the house, in a luscious garden. She was crouched on the ground with her slender back to him. Rather than speaking, he cleared his throat to avoid alarming her.

"John! How are you doing?"

"A little better, I think." Even to himself, he didn't sound all that convinced.

"Are you hungry? Do you like strawberries? I planted them myself! Sid got the seeds for me two days ago. I also have cucumbers, radishes, and arugula. I could make you a salad."

"Thanks. Maybe later." Fully grown and ready to pick in two days—literally overnight. *Signs and wonders.* "Where is he?"

"Sid? No idea. He's hopping around the area, training his...gift. You know."

"Mmm." Marshall sensed and shared her difficulty in broaching the topic. He'd felt the same way all along.

Undoubtedly, Sue had also noticed that the two of them were also blessed with extraordinary abilities. Blessed or cursed, depending on how you looked at it. But for now, they didn't have the courage to state it out loud. First they would have to admit their...*uniqueness* to themselves. Better to stick to talking about Sid.

"I hope he's being careful."

"You told him to be again and again in your lucid moments."

"I did?" He only dimly remembered.

The girl laughed merrily. "Over and over. Even though it's pretty unlikely that someone with his paranoia *wouldn't* be careful. Right?"

"Sorry if I was talking a load of crap. The fever, the drugs..."

“Don’t worry, it wasn’t that bad. No one could understand what you were moaning about in your delirium anyway. Say, John...”

“Yeah?” He knew what was coming.

“This is our fourth day here. What happens next? To us and him?”

“I don’t know. That depends on Sid. He’s the one with his finger on the trigger in a very literal sense. I assume he still has the gun with him?”

Sue nodded. “He never lets it out of his sight. He also never tells me when or where he sleeps. He comes and goes at random times.”

“Have you tried to—”

“Get the jump on him or outwit him some other way? No. But you know him. Sid doesn’t trust anyone, even us. It’s only gotten worse since the shooting.”

“I can’t blame him.” The noise, the violence, the death... Even Marshall was still reeling from it. “But running away and hiding is no solution.”

“Sid won’t let the police get their hands on him. Never ever.”

A queasy feeling rose in John’s stomach. He hoped it was hunger. “Can I take you up on that salad? And the strawberries?”

“Absolutely!”

He bent down to help her pick the produce. Too quickly. He felt giddy, stumbling forwards as he saw stars. If Sue hadn’t caught him, he would have fallen straight down. Marshall was still conscious, but he couldn’t do much more than be ashamed of his own weakness.

They ate, washing down their meal with lukewarm water from a canister Sid had brought to the house.

“Stolen from the only store in the area that’s still in business,” Sue explained. “A gas station convenience store about fifteen miles north of here. All our supplies come from there, mostly chocolate bars and other unhealthy fare.” She pouted defensively. “What about it? Better than starving, at least.”

“And they haven’t noticed the thefts?”

“They probably have, but Sid says he only jumps in there in the middle of the night and leaves without a trace. And the owner has plenty of other suspects. His customer base isn’t exactly the most upstanding.”

Another few miles north, Sue explained, there was a prison. More precisely, there was a prison outpost in the form of an agricultural and biochemical plant.

“Flat blocks of concrete, half sunken into the ground. The prisoners who work there can have visitors as a reward for good behavior. The relatives are the gas station’s lifeblood.”

“I see.”

Marshall rubbed his temples. Rage boiled within him. It was a scandal that so many people were incarcerated in his country, often for minor offenses. Almost one in a thousand of the nation’s population were imprisoned, by far the highest proportion in the world and more than seven times as many as in China, for instance. Looked at cynically, it was a flourishing industrial sector; in its facilities, more people, most of them dark-skinned, were being exploited as cheap labor—more in prison than there had been slaves in all of North America shortly before the start of the Civil War.

John Marshall had wanted to protect his charges from a fate like that. But the Pain Shelter was history. It was over; a shattered dream.

Shattered like Tyler’s head, with its flat-top curls… He repressed the memory and the painful thoughts of what the remaining children might be enduring.

“I hope Sid stays well away from the prison.”

“You can bet on that. He’s giving it a wide berth. Nothing terrifies him more than being locked up.”

“I know. But if he, uh…takes a wrong turn?”

“His control over the ability is getting better by the day. That’s progress, at least.”

“What’s he said about it?”

“He calls it teleportation. Sid has no idea how or why it works, exactly. Maybe using psi and the fifth dimension. Those are words he knows from his science fiction stories. Anyway, he says he just has to wish to be somewhere really hard, and bam! He’s there. At first he could only move a couple of meters, but now he can make the fifteen-mile jump to the gas station in one go.”

“Not bad.” Not exactly comforting either.

“It takes a lot out of him, though. You can see that he’s literally losing weight. He’s shed a lot of his baby fat.”

“The jumps are eating into him.”

“Yeah. And where it’ll end…” Sue trailed off mid-sentence.

Marshall, too, saw the sparks that signaled Sid’s return.

“Hi!” The boy’s homemade space suit was filthy and hung baggily from his limbs. In one hand he held a burlap sack, and in the other…a small animal. He held it out to Sue. “I found it on the street. Run over. Can you make it better?”

Flummoxed, she took the bundle of fur into the crook of her arm. After she’d touched the animal for a moment, she shook her head. “It’s dying. Getting closer every moment.”

“Oh. That’s too bad.” He pressed his lips together. However, his face, obscured by a layer of dust, quickly brightened. “Then we can

fry it and eat it!"

This sudden mood swing made the hair on the back of Marshall's neck stand on end. Sid had never been especially low-maintenance to begin with, but now... The experiences of the last few days had visibly changed him. In what direction still remained to be seen.

Sue bent down and carefully laid the animal on the floor. The furry body twitched once, then went limp. Its legs were spread wide apart, and its skull was tipped to the side. A wide tire track ran across its pale pink stomach. The creature resembled an undersized raccoon with strange proportions. Marshall assumed that it wasn't a cub but the result of selective breeding. In recent decades, genetic engineering had achieved spectacular feats. Miniature varieties of certain wild creatures were welcomed as pets and cuddly companions by wealthy families.

"I have more swag." Sid rummaged in the bag, grinning teasingly like a teenage Santa Claus. Once he had shoveled out all the miscellaneous odds and ends, he revealed a flat package. With cautious fingers, he unraveled layer after layer of bubble wrap. In the end he revealed...

"A tablet!" Sue cried. "Please tell me it works."

"It sure does. Still has a little juice left." Sid beamed with pride. "We can go online and finally see what's been going on in the world for the past few days."

They didn't see any signs of a large-scale manhunt against them. The international news and local Texan media were all dominated by one topic: the *Stardust*'s landing in the Gobi Desert.

On one site after another, they saw the same short sequence—a recording of an unsecured call between the Nevada Fields control center and the space craft making its landing approach. At first the screen was dark. Only a voice could be heard. It was a deep voice of a man accustomed to giving orders but currently quite agitated.

"This is General Lesly K. Pounder." It was the leader of the US

space agency. “*Stardust*, please come in!”

He emphatically repeated the demand, and then a connection was established. The screen lit up, glaringly overexposed but recognizable as the interior of an American space craft with one of the astronauts in the foreground.

“Rhodan, you’re alive! Thank God! We’d given up all hope for you and your men. We...”

The general’s voice faltered. The contrast had evened out, and now a figure could be seen on a recliner behind Rhodan, covered not with a space suit but a shimmering crimson robe. The skinny man had a high forehead and platinum blond hair that hung to his shoulders. His skin was pale too, like an albino’s. It looked waxy and smooth, which didn’t seem to match the deep creases that lined his slender, noble face.

General Pounder could be heard breathing in deeply. “Rhodan, what kind of being is that?”

“His name is Crest da Zoltral. He’s an Arkonide—and a friend of humanity.” Rhodan raised a hand to forestall Pounder’s attempt to interject. “I wanted to introduce Crest before I head off. It’s all thanks to people like you that we had the honor of meeting him and the Arkonides. Goodbye, Pounder!”

And that was that. The screen went dark again.

Famous last words, thought John Marshall. Rarely had a few short sentences thrown the whole planet into such turmoil.

“Aliens,” Sue whispered. “Rhodan met aliens on the Moon and brought one of them back to Earth.”

Slow-motion playbacks and enlarged stills showed an uncannily human-like face. And yet, it was clear as day that the man named Crest was not of this world. It could have been down to his clothes, his complexion, or his gentle, friendly-yet-distant smile, but his eyes were what cinched it. They were large and as red as those in a flash photograph that needed retouching. There was something

inscrutable about them too. They seemed full of the wisdom of a very long life.

Marshall felt paralyzed. He'd always held a rational belief that humanity wasn't the only intelligent species in the universe. How could they be? The Milky Way alone was home to hundreds of billions of stars, and there were hundreds of billions of other galaxies in the observable universe. To believe that this backwater solar system held the only intelligent life felt illogical, self-centered, and dumb. Countless novels, films, and TV shows had spent generations making a mockery of this narrow-minded narcissism.

Still, there was logical reasoning and special effects-laden Hollywood crowd-pleasers, and then there was personal experience. In this instant, the difference struck Marshall like a tremendous thunderbolt. A few hours ago, it had really happened. An extraterrestrial had landed in the Gobi Desert with Perry Rhodan. Outside of a few dyed-in-the-wool conspiracy theorists, no one on the planet had any doubt about that.

Sid González stood there frozen as well, but on the inside his emotions ran riot. For a few seconds, his thoughts turned cartwheels in his mind. Then he declared, "We're heading out! Right now!"

"No. Don't do anything rash, Sid, for God's sake."

There was no use fighting it. The boy grabbed Marshall and Sue tightly by the arms. Their surroundings disappeared in a swarm of sparks.

6.

A Duel at Dawn

July 1, 2036

An odd rattling woke Perry Rhodan. A moment later, he shook Bull's shoulder.

"Sounds like they've opened fire again."

They leaped up. As they ran out of the shelter, Rhodan called out, "Sounds different from before, though."

Outside, they were met by a colorful, flickering light. Beyond the *Stardust*, beyond the construction site of the ever-growing city of Terrania and outside of the defensive shield that spread over them in a dome, missiles were exploding into multicolored plumes.

"A firework? What the..."

"Signal fire. To get our attention." Rhodan stopped and pointed to a spot on the perimeter of the Arkonide energy shield. "Bai Jun wants to talk. In the same place as before."

"I'm coming with you this time."

"No. You stay here and act as though you're sending our crewmates the all-clear and keeping them informed until I get back —because that's exactly what you'd do if they were still here. No doubt the Chinese army is watching us with the best telescopes they have."

Grumbling, Bull conceded. Rhodan strolled to the rendezvous point in no great hurry. The rattling died out before he'd gone more than a few steps, the pyrotechnics giving way to the pale gray of dawn.

General Bai Jun was alone—a show of courage, but also a correct

estimation of his advantageous position. He knew that it wouldn't be worthwhile for Rhodan to attack him personally. If he was killed or captured, he'd just be replaced by another opponent who was less open to conversation.

"Good morning, Major Rhodan!" Bai Jun bowed gallantly. He was neither tall nor short, around fifty, and brown-skinned. His uniform fit like a glove and lacked any unnecessary embellishments, but his full cheeks, and the bags under his narrow eyes, revealed the pleasure-seeker underneath.

Rhodan returned the greeting. "Excellent fireworks display," he added. "Some say there's no better art form. As soon as they reach their peak of perfection, they disappear, leaving the viewer with just a memory."

"Indeed. A true spectacle, transient like so many on this Earth. *Short-lived*, you might say." Bai Jun spoke perfect English with only the barest hint of an accent, and he knew how to add meaningful undertones.

And pauses for effect.

When Rhodan didn't respond to the insinuation, instead silently raising his eyebrows, the general spread out his arms apologetically. "Forgive the overblown performance, but what was I supposed to do? Your energized battlement lacks both a door and a bell."

"Sadly, the inventors didn't think about that. I'm honored by your visit, but is there a specific reason for it?"

"You're not one to beat around the bush, are you? I like that. I want to make you an offer."

"At this hour?"

"There's a Chinese proverb: 'Make your whole year's plans in the spring and your day's plans early in the morning.' The earlier we come to an agreement, the better for everyone involved. For the whole planet, in fact! Your actions, though undeniably courageous, are causing tensions that are highly likely to result in a global

nuclear war. If you've put humanity on the brink of nuclear destruction, will you be happy to have that on your conscience?"

"You've got it backwards. I would never have forgiven myself if I hadn't made an attempt to pull us back from the brink."

"By having robots build a city in the middle of the Gobi? A city made of sand? A Potemkin village that will never be inhabited! Or at most for a few days, perhaps weeks, by a few defectors and one old alien. I believed you to be too sensible for such pipe dreams."

"International relations were already in a critical state before our Moon voyage and would have come to a head before long even if we hadn't done a thing. Admittedly, my decision not to deliver Crest da Zoltral to any of the three power blocs might have increased tensions in the short term. But what was the alternative? Do you honestly believe the situation wouldn't have intensified just as much if the United States had access to Arkonide technology? Or China or Russia?"

"In other words, you believe the aliens' technology is safest in your hands. Does that mean you intend to set yourself up as a world dictator?"

Bai Jun had struck a nerve with that comment. Perry Rhodan didn't have a polished plan. Just a vision. "You mentioned an offer, General."

"I've been authorized to grant you asylum in the People's Republic of China. The fact that you unlawfully invaded our airspace and occupied part of our territory by force of arms..." He made a dismissive hand gesture. "My country's leadership is prepared to generously overlook this. Additionally, I will personally use every ounce of my influence to ensure that you are treated honorably. I am extending my hand to you, Major Rhodan. China is extending its hand."

"You can call me *Perry* Rhodan; my military rank is obsolete. Listen, I'm not accusing you personally of any subterfuge, but you can't seriously be suggesting that you can guarantee Crest's safety."

“More so than you can, I’d guess.” The general stepped as close as the flickering shield would allow and lowered his voice. “We must face the facts. You’re fighting a losing battle. As long as the energy barrier is in place, we can’t enter, but you can’t leave either. Breakout attempts like this recent one won’t succeed again.” He pointed upwards. “Do you see that?”

Rhodan tilted his head back. In the early light, he could make out black points spread out across the entire dome, spaced out a few dozen meters from each other. There had to be thousands of them.

“Drones?”

“We prefer the term ‘hornets.’ Our engineers are very proud of them. Mobile, semiautonomous weapons systems. Capable of independently adjusting their flight paths in concert with one another or, if it came to it despite expectations, instantly giving chase. There are too many even for those fancy little flying machines that the aliens ceded to you.”

“The Arkonides also possess far bigger and more powerful ships, as you know painfully well.”

Thora had come to Earth in an auxiliary craft of the *Aetron* measuring sixty meters across and been shot at by the Chinese during her approach. Her counterattack had cost hundreds of soldiers their lives.

“True,” he said, drawing out the word, “but this raises another point. Your relationship with this apparently rather advanced alien race seems somewhat…flimsy. If they care so much about the Earth, and you in particular, why wouldn’t they embark on a real, large-scale, planned invasion? You and I both know how that would go. Subjugation or elimination of the key power centers, forced capitulation, installation of their own leader, perhaps in the form of *Mister* Perry Rhodan. If I had weaponry like that and such a highly prized native ally… But your Arkonide friends are making no moves in that direction whatsoever. Their behavior is curiously passive. Indifferent, even. They fought back against a misguided attack like they were swatting flies, but apart from that, nothing. Could it be

they're just passing through? Like tourists who want to experience the local culture for one night but then leave the next morning without ever wasting another thought on their insignificant stopover?"

Privately, Rhodan had to give the man credit. His astute analysis was unsettlingly close to the mark. He couldn't admit that to Bai Jun, of course. The general's whole purpose was to wear him down with his crafty, well-considered mind games.

"Close, but no cigar," Rhodan replied offhandedly. "The fact is, the Arkonides have no plans to annex our planet for their galactic empire. Their sophisticated ethos forbids them from unduly influencing our ongoing development. They'll involve themselves as little as possible—but also as much as necessary."

Bai Jun smirked. "With all due respect, that all sounds a little vague to me. It's as if no contractual stipulations have been agreed upon, nor have there been any discussions held on equal footing to speak of. It's as though your entire argument rests mainly on your own idealistic wishful thinking."

This People's Liberation Army soldier was a damn tough opponent! He was a trained and practiced player of the game—an expert in the tasks that required his skills. Not a man to be underestimated. It certainly wasn't a coincidence that his country's leaders had selected him to settle this unusual situation in China's favor.

Rhodan stifled a yawn. He was tired; he hadn't slept for much more than an hour. His eyes were burning with the strain of continually looking past the shimmering of the defensive shield that separated them from their adversaries.

Bai Jun, on the other hand, looked as fresh as a daisy. After taking a single step backwards with the elegant hip motion of a dancer, he continued. "Don't try to delude me or yourself, Mr. Ex-Major! You're sitting in a trap. You're surrounded, sealed off, and further help from the Moon is a dubious prospect. Meanwhile, weapons are being put into position all over the world with the goal of making a lethal first strike. But the world war, the nuclear

holocaust, all the bloodshed, the potential for irreparable devastation of our planet—none of it has to happen. See reason. Take the People's Republic of China up on its fair offer and come into my custody. The moment you deactivate this defensive shield, an unbearable weight will fall from your shoulders. Snap out of it, Perry Rhodan. One word from you and this whole terrible ordeal is over."

The temptation to throw it all away was immense. What if the general was right? What if Rhodan's rough and ready plan turned out to be a damp squib?

All the circumstances were against them. As had just recently been made abundantly clear, they couldn't count on backup from the Arkonides. Earth's heads of state should have started overcoming their prejudices and old rivalries in the face of their radically expanded horizons, unifying to meet a never-before-seen challenge, but instead they had reacted to the visit from space with more mistrust, a lust for power, and blinkered thinking.

Rhodan gazed out across the vast, flat plain covered in dust and gravel. Around the defensive shield, an empty ring had formed with a diameter of around a kilometer or two. Beyond this stood a huge and ever-growing military camp with transport helicopters arriving and leaving at all hours of the day. Roughly four kilometers away was the highest peak, which Bai Jun had made into his observation post.

The general had no doubt sensed that his argument had struck a chord that was festering in Perry Rhodan. However, he didn't pile on the pressure. He waited for a decision without a hint of impatience.

"I won't refuse your offer straight out," Rhodan said at last, choosing his words carefully. "Not right away. Give me time to discuss it with my friends. I'd like you to give some more ground as well. As a sign of goodwill, why not disable the signal jammers you've set up that are keeping us from communicating with the outside world? Then we can at least form our own opinion about the global situation."

The general guffawed. “My deepest regrets, but that is out of the question. You already wreaked more than enough havoc on the world with your last message. Since you delivered that speech, an endless stream of people, millions of them, have been trying to reach the Gobi. Thousands have managed it so far. They’re constructing primitive camps just beyond ours. But they’re not the kinds of people you want on your side. They’re the crazies of this world, the wash-outs, the ones unable to cope with real life. You can’t expect anything from these dregs of society except that their slums will soon hold even more victims of your delusional ideas.”

“Plenty of visionaries were called insane at first.”

“Most of them correctly. Rhodan, your idealism reflects well on you, but the dream of a planet united in peace and harmony won’t come to fruition anytime soon. It conflicts with human nature on a fundamental level, and history is brimming with evidence of that. The fate of the Uighur people, from whom my mother originates, is only one tragic example. Conflict and war are an inherent part of our species—an essential part of our culture, even. Maybe that can be changed one day, but that’s a day neither of us will live to see. It lies far in the distance, centuries or millennia from now. If it ever occurs, world peace will be the end of a long and winding road, and not”—he snapped his fingers—“the result of a magic trick, as you naively imagine.”

“I must disagree with you, General. I believe mankind is better than its reputation would suggest. All it needs is a chance to prove it. And hope. The Arkonides, Terrania, and the vision of Terra as a unified planet all open doors that have never existed in human history.”

“I’d give anything for you to be right, Perry Rhodan, but even if you have the best of intentions, I can’t share your view of things. Rose-tinted glasses don’t suit me. In any case, I’ll give you three days to come to your senses. Seventy-two hours, starting now. If you haven’t yielded by then, I’ll be forced to resort to other measures. I wish you a pleasant day. Spend it on careful reflection. It could be one of your last.”

Bai Jun bowed, energetically turned on his heel, and walked off.

Perry Rhodan counted to ten in his mind, then shouted, “Wait! I know a Chinese proverb too.”

The general stopped. As he turned back, he lowered the hand that was holding a com device up to his ear and put the device in his pocket. “Namely?”

“All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle.”

“Oho! A classic often found in fortune cookies. But you should also consider how quickly and easily a single candle can be blown out. On that note, we’re confident we’ll be able to capture your escapee soon. Or should I say your defector?”

Rhodan narrowed his eyes, pretending to be surprised. Directly afterwards, he acted as though he was trying to hide his dismay.

“Defector? Not in the slightest. We came to a mutual agreement with Clark Flipper that he should be allowed to follow his own interests.”

“Pretty words, but I don’t believe them. I had a front-row seat to his first escape attempt, I’m sure you agree. Either way, he’ll provide us with clarification soon enough. My men are hot on his heels, I’ve just been told.”

“Provided he doesn’t give you the slip again.”

“I’m afraid I must dash this hope as well. Our radar was stymied by the absorbent exterior of his improvised shell for a while, but evidently Flipper has now been forced to cast it off. Despite the Arkonide space suit’s camouflage function, my interceptors have them in their sights. And I can’t imagine his defensive shield will hold for much longer. It must use tremendous amounts of energy.”

Bai Jun had hit the bull’s-eye again: the Arkonide battledresses’ energy stores were by no means inexhaustible. The shield’s operation was limited to a maximum of thirty-two minutes.

Despite this, Perry Rhodan was celebrating inside. This was the exact information he’d been hoping to coax out of the general. It

was a huge relief, but he didn't let it show; instead, he feigned consternation.

"If you really do capture Flipper, please be gentle with him. We agreed that if such a thing were to happen, he should willingly reveal everything he knows. Torturing him would be senseless. Beyond that, he'll confirm practically all the details I've given you."

"We'll see. You are a remarkable character, but I fear you may be too soft, all things considered. You're an irredeemable fantasist. A dreamer."

"Not the only one."

"Certainly, if that's any consolation. Now, please excuse me; I have an interrogation to prepare for. Farewell. No, one more thing. The portable diagnostic unit I lent you..."

"What about it?"

"You claimed it was for Captain Flipper, if I recall correctly. Said that his immune system was in poor shape or some such. Now that Flipper has run away, you don't need it anymore and can return it to me."

Wily old fox! thought Rhodan. But he'd reckoned with this trickery as well. "There are still three of us left, and we aren't in peak condition either, honestly. The stresses of space flight are still taking their toll on us. I'd like to hold onto the diagnostic unit, if it's all the same to you. I think you can cope with the small reduction of your inventory."

"Of course." Bai Jun chuckled. "Or could it be that it was intended for your Arkonide friend Crest all along, perhaps? He didn't appear to be in the best of health in your com transmission from the *Stardust*'s cockpit."

"Thank you for your concern. He's doing just fine."

"He hasn't been seen outdoors for a while now. Send Mr. da Zoltral my regards and get-well wishes. I'm sure you've already told him all about the merits of Chinese medicine, which have been

known for thousands of years. Goodbye, Perry Rhodan.

“Goodbye, General Bai Jun.”

This time, he let the man go. Rhodan headed back towards the *Stardust*, his head cast down as if lost in thought. He reined in his steps, even though he could hardly wait to share the good news with Reg Bull, who was no doubt bursting with impatience. The general’s ironic remarks, meant as a final surgical strike to his psyche, had shown that their bold plan had worked.

Unnoticed by the besieging forces, Manoli and Crest had successfully left the dome along with Flipper.

7.

Aerobatics

July 1, 2036

Meanwhile, Clark Flipper was having the most fun he'd had in ages. He was playing tag with a not insubstantial proportion of the Chinese air force.

The first squadron to start chasing him, made up of four fighter jets of the designation Chengdu FC-3 Fierce Dragon, had been on his tail since he'd left the dome. They'd no doubt been placed as close as possible to the *Stardust*'s landing site to lie there in wait, since the area around the Juyan salt lake area wasn't normally home to an outpost of the Chinese air force.

Flipper, Crest, and Manoli, who were still flying together at this point, pressed closely against each other, would have been able to evade the enemy craft without issue despite the latter's top speed of almost Mach 2. Superior speed wasn't much use if you lost sight of your target and neither radar nor infrared sensors showed any sign of them. But that wasn't the plan.

Instead, the Arkonide battledresses sent out small but detectable impulses from time to time to lay a scent, as if their camouflage function wasn't quite perfect. They dodged and dived but kept their general direction the same, heading south east towards the capital, Beijing, whose suburbs were just seventy kilometers from the Gobi Desert's foothills.

Clark Flipper could vividly imagine the tense atmosphere at Chinese high command right now. Their military leadship no doubt assumed that he was planning some kind of suicide attack on the capital. When the readings on his battledress told him that additional squadrons had been dispatched from HQ to target him and that even more were taking to the skies from distant bases in Shenyang, Jinan, and Lanzhou, he felt a sense of satisfaction.

That's what I like to see.

Over the Taihang Mountains, which reached from the Juma River valley to the Shanxi plateau, Flipper made a hard turn to the west and followed the mountain range until the map data from the *Stardust* let him identify the Guoliang Canyon. "Time to go our separate ways," he told his companions.

They wished each other luck, then plunged into the canyon and set their suits' camouflage functions to maximum power. Flipper detached the shell that had given the pursuers such trouble with its radar absorption coating. The Arkonide metal sheet whirled down into the depths, and with it, undetectable by any human technology, Manoli and Crest.

Flipper, on the other hand, deactivated his shielding. To the fighter jet pilots racing towards him from every side, it would look like an all-or-nothing attempt to fly under their radars had led him to graze the near-vertical canyon wall and lose his inertial dampening in the process. Pretending it was a great, desperate effort, he picked up height and speed again. Cutting a zigzag path less than twenty meters above the ridge, continually wending from one mountainside to another, he painted his pursuers a picture of himself as a wild animal in its death throes.

Clark Flipper was a good pilot, but not an exceptional one like Reginald Bull, who himself couldn't hold a candle to Perry Rhodan. That was why Flipper had been happy to make do with the role of astronomer and payload specialist on the *Stardust*. Yet having said that, there was no astronaut at NASA who was more into aerobatics than he was. He knew every one of the many figures listed in the Aresti Catalog, the bible of aerobatics. He could have recited them in his sleep.

If a fairy had appeared before Flipper years ago, during his adolescence, and granted him one wish, he wouldn't have had to hesitate. He'd have demanded, "I want a device that neutralizes gravity! So I can fly up, down, left, right, any direction I want in the tightest maneuvers I can imagine. And get away with it, because there'll be no centrifugal force, because weight and mass and kinetic energy don't matter anymore. Can I have that, please?"

Now his teenage dream had come true. The Arkonide battledress had a combined anti-grav and pulser propulsion unit controlled by a positronic computer that seemed to know what Flipper planned to do before he knew himself. Orders were read from the wearer's body language or communicated verbally. He could give his intuition free reign without worrying about trivial technical details. Flight was *carefree* in the truest sense of the word.

The Chengdu jets' pilots were also in so-called anti-g suits, but those had nothing to do with real anti-gravity. They were liquid-filled full-body garments that had been in use since the 2010s, first in the German Eurofighters but also in the Zivko Edge propeller craft flown in the popular Air Race World Championship. They weren't bad; in one of those, you could withstand a short-term peak pressure of a little over ten gravos.

The Chinese pilots were pushing their limits as they tried to surround Flipper and make him surrender. But despite their expert command of their craft, they ultimately had no chance. He always evaded them at what appeared to be the very last moment, although by no means had he unleashed his suit's full potential. He also dodged most of the missiles fired at him. Once in a while he let one detonate against his defensive shield for dramatic effect; they proved as ineffective as the volleys from the planes' autocannons.

He could have kept playing "Catch me if you can, dragons!" for far longer as only a third of the shield's energy reserves had been used up, but after a few minutes, once he was sure that he'd brought the entire horde along with him and lured them sufficiently far away from the canyon, he decided that was enough. He gave it some gas and nosedived towards the Shanxi plateau.

The most expansive loess plateau on Earth was perfectly suited to his purposes. Outside the city of Datong, miles of monotone brown dominated the undulating landscape. Flipper raced along a bare handful of meters above it. Thanks to the battledress's chameleon-like ability to match its color perfectly to the environment, he became invisible to normal optical detection, while his radar and infrared signatures were suppressed to a great extent by his shielding, which he activated again. Additionally, flying so close to the ground limited the fighter jets' mobility.

Flipper followed the contours of the surface, taking advantage of the deep chasms and the additional jaggedness resulting from the many ore mining operations. He smoothly dodged one of the missiles sent after him, likely a PL-11, by diverting it to an electricity sub-station that looked “hotter” to their sensors. But the attempt alone showed that the Chinese fighters at least knew his rough location.

A storm was brewing on the horizon; it was the rainy season. He charged towards the dark wall of water. When he reached it, he had to reduce his speed, but otherwise the monsoon weather suited him just fine.

His pursuers, on the other hand, would find it far less pleasant.

Flipper didn’t spend too long celebrating after the sweeping change in direction that finally let him shake off the fighters. Flying at medium altitude, he set a course for Tibet. Now that he’d kept his word and fulfilled his duty, triumph gave way to anxiety. His heart grew heavy. It was highly likely that, despite the miraculous Arkonide suit, he would arrive too late.

Beth had been reported missing before the *Stardust*’s launch on June 19, which was eleven days ago, close to the summit of the Annapurna massif, in the death zone above 6,000 meters, a place hardly more hospitable than the Moon’s surface. Even at that point, it had been thirty-six hours since the last contact with her climbing party. By all estimations, she had to be long dead.

Reginald Bull was totally right, of course. It was a futile effort, sheer lunacy, to expect that he could swoop in and save her. No one who got stranded so high up without making it back to camp could survive for two weeks in the ice. Either a search party had found and rescued her in the meantime, or...

Lunacy indeed. But Flipper needed to make certain. And he would be eternally grateful to Perry Rhodan for giving him the chance to do so. Bull, on the other hand, would never see eye to eye on this no matter how much the two men liked each other. He would never understand why Flipper was heading for the

Himalayas, now fortunately unimpeded. Why he stubbornly kept flying through day and night, as one Chinese province after another rushed by below him. He came across as someone who didn't take life too seriously—a big kid, a favorite with the ladies who never passed up an adventure. A notoriously happy-go-lucky guy who had a new flame every week. At *least* once a week.

All that was true. From a statistical standpoint, Beth was one out of a hundred if not a thousand. But she had been his anchor. She was the one he'd always gone back to, his grounding, his refuge. Beth had taken him into her arms despite everything and let him sob his self-doubt into her wonderful-scented skin.

And now she was...

Clark Flipper was flying to the Himalayas to bury her.

8.

Skipping

June 28 to July 1, 2036

NASA's one remaining space center, Nevada Fields, was named after the place where it had been built. The area consisted of high valleys, flat at the bottom and bone dry, with almost no vegetation to speak of. Only the Joshua trees tirelessly braved the bleak landscape, and the equally tenacious mountainside pines that shimmered in the haze.

With forty stories, the control center was the tallest building around. Right at the top was the office of flight director Lesly K. Pounder. Far below, in the lobby, behind a counter made of wrought aluminium that showed every fingerprint from the slightest touch, sat Crystal Kovalczyk.

She hated her job. It was boring and badly paid. Who needed a receptionist when the security guards stood by the revolving door anyway, scrupulously questioning and frisking every unknown arrival and letting them in if they passed? Honestly, it made no sense that NASA still kept a receptionist on the payroll given the perennial budget cuts. All she ever did was show a big, fake smile to people who rushed past and ignored her. Why even spend the money?

That said, it wouldn't have been easy for Crystal to find a better job. Nowhere in Nevada, at least, outside of Las Vegas—and moving to that ghastly hotbed of sin would have been impossible to reconcile with her beliefs.

Not much was going on today. Even though another shuttle launch was being prepared, the control tower still had a leisurely air about it. The upper levels might have been more hectic, but none of that had an impact on Crystal all the way down here.

She passed the time by watching TV. Officially it was against the

rules to put a show on one of the four monitors built into the counter, but who would care? No one gave a damn about Crystal Kovalczyk. No one. They didn't even notice her existence. Grinning like an idiot and giving a friendly wave? Her job could have been filled by a mannequin.

Robert Robertson, on the other hand, spoke directly to her. The preacher was speaking to the camera, of course. Crystal knew how it worked; she wasn't under any illusions. Robertson was addressing all his disciples at once. But the things he said spoke to her heart. He didn't pull any punches. He unsparingly laid the world bare as it really was.

"It doesn't take a genius to see that these supposed aliens," Robertson thundered from a pulpit decorated with a glowing neon cross, "are no more than the financial mafia's latest pathetic attempt at distracting us from the real problems in this country! The silent majority, who still have some moral backbone, have spent decades tied down by the heavy shackles of interest rates. Those who have so far evaded this form of modern slavery and the brainwashing that comes with it will soon be forced to accept the yoke. The next curbing of our rights as citizens will be justified by this oh-so-sensational visit from outer space."

The giant projector screen behind him showed clips from an old cartoon with laughably cheap animation. Grotesquely leering Martians with an armada of flying saucers conquered the Earth, leaving historical buildings like the Eiffel Tower and the Taj Mahal in ruins.

"Those who have the eyes to see, however, will recognize the brazen fraud at play. Thus I ask you, brothers and sisters, to stay strong in your beliefs! The almighty God watches over us. He made the Earth, the Moon, the sun, and the stars in six days so that we could enjoy them. 'Be fruitful and multiply!' So it is written in the Bible. It says nothing about any cockamamie aliens, on the other hand. Not in the New Testament or the Old. Why would God trouble himself sowing life somewhere else when he's already made us his chosen people? Soon enough, these false reports will go up in smoke and prove to be exactly what they are: lies courtesy of the devil. In the meantime, we will remain persistent as ever, putting

Satan in his place along with his lecherous demons that walk the Earth. To support our fight against evil, please donate to the account shown below. Now, let us sing all the louder in praise of the glory of God. Let us sing, 'Hallelujah! Hallelujah!'"

"Hallelujah!" Crystal murmured.

A hot gust of wind brushed against her, a sensation that she initially ascribed to the preacher's revelations. Then she saw the sparks flying everywhere in the lobby, and the three figures who appeared as if from nowhere. One of them, a dark-skinned demon, held a pistol aimed right at her.

"Where's your boss?" he asked.

She lifted her arm and pointed upwards.

Crystal Kovalczyk died in the hail of bullets from the security guards, who opened fire at the specters. The strangers disappeared into thin air as quickly as they'd arrived.

Sid González, Sue Mirafiore, and John Marshall materialized in a room with walls made primarily of glass. Through the panes, Marshall could see all the way to a sharp dividing line in the distance between the dazzling blue sky and the silhouettes of the arid hills below. Noticeably nearer and lower was the launch pad on which a shuttle was currently being fueled.

Behind an antiquated desk that looked tiny in comparison to the expansive office sat an old man with shiny, light brown skin, sparse hair, and a marked double chin. Recovering from his shock surprisingly quickly, he leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms in front of his chest, and asked, "Can I help you?"

Far below them, shots rang out, followed by sirens.

"I want to go to the Moon," said Sid. "To the aliens!"

"Aha!" General Pounder, which is who this man was, remained remarkably composed.

Marshall sensed that the head of the American space program had no fear despite the gun aimed at his face. Lately, Pounder had experienced so many unprecedented developments that even three strangers appearing before him in a way that defied explanation didn't faze him.

"And what makes you think you'll be of any use up there?"

"I...can teleport. And Sue is a healer. John hears thoughts, or something like that. We're, we are...a team of mutants. Or the start of one, at least."

"I repeat my question," said Pounder coolly. "That's all well and good, but why should I replace one of my highly trained astronauts with one of you? Why aren't you trying to get into the Gobi instead, like half the world's population right now?"

The rising and falling sound of an alarm blasted from the intercom on the desk, then a surging voice: "Attention! We are under attack. Armed intruders have infiltrated the building. Maximum alert! The presumed terrorists possess highly advanced technology of an unknown nature. In accordance with emergency scenario alpha, all staff are to—"

Pounder switched off the speaker. Sid brandished the weapon so wildly that his companions moved out of the way.

"This Crest. The Arkonide. He comes from the Moon. Major Perry Rhodan brought him here on the *Stardust*. That means an alien ship has to have landed on the Moon. I would love to jump straight there, but...I can't go that far yet."

"Kid, let's assume everything you're saying is true. My question still holds. Let me ask you a third time: what do you want with the aliens?"

"I... I... We're proof—me, John, and Sue—that humanity has more to give. They need to know that so they can judge the human race properly. And...so they take me with them when they fly off again, out into the stars..." Sid's voice petered out. Tears had welled up in his eyes. With a loud click, he disabled the safety on the gun.

“Will you let me fly on the shuttle or not?”

“What happens if I say no?”

“Then, then—I’ll kill you!”

“No,” said Pounder, “you wouldn’t do that. Not you.”

John Marshall sensed that Sid’s pent-up frustration was about to burst forth. He felt the waves of despair flooding the boy’s consciousness as his finger curled around the trigger.

“No!” cried Marshall, moving to stop him. He threw himself at his charge but missed him. Sid was faster and squeezed before Marshall could reach him.

A shot resounded.

Glass shattered.

Then the room faded into a pale pyrotechnics display.

And a new place appeared in its stead.

To John Marshall’s left was a helicopter, and to the right, a huge pink pig drove past. Directly in front of him shone the blue light of a police car, while a few centimeters behind him, a submarine honked its horn insistently. Above them all, UFOs hovered up and down on hydraulic arms. Oversized, sky-blue seahorses bobbing up and down completed the surreal scene.

It took a few wheezing breaths before he realized he was on a children’s carousel. He was in the back of a scaled down copy of a fire truck, packed in tightly beside Sue and Sid.

“Where are we?” he croaked.

“A fairground,” Sue replied. “Sid, for God’s sake, put the gun away!”

Shivering, the boy obeyed. “Did… Did I…” he stammered. “Did I…shoot him?”

“I don’t think so. But you came damn close to it,” she replied.

“This has to end,” said Marshall quietly but firmly. “Sid, it can’t go on like this. You’re endangering yourself, us, and many others. Innocent people! I know you, and that’s not who you are. Did you hear? They thought we were terrorists! You’re not a terrorist, Sid. Or a wild gunman on a shooting spree. But you’re this close to becoming exactly that! We need to talk, urgently. Please take us somewhere quiet, somewhere as isolated as possible. Maybe a—”

Sparks. And once again the crazy, colorless and soundless undertow that turned in on itself to form a merciless vortex.

“Forest,” Marshall finished.

The area around them was hot and stuffy. Birds’ twittering was accompanied by the powerful smell of fermenting fruits and rotten leaves. A jungle. No, a palm house.

Marshall hurriedly looked around and listened in all directions. Shocked, he realized he had also deployed another, as-yet-unnamed sense, doing so as if it were the most natural thing in the world. There was no time to dwell on that, though.

“No one else nearby.”

This time it was Sue’s turn to ask. “Where are we?”

“No idea.” Sid was crying. “I already told you, I don’t know how it works. John wanted to get away, and I did too. Don’t get angry with me. I don’t even like it anymore. Why can’t I jump through time too?” He pounded against his head with both fists.

“Relax. We’ll get through this. It’ll be fine.”

Had their brief visit to a carousel come from Sid longing to be a small child again, Marshall wondered? It was obvious that his gift was overwhelming him, never mind the maelstrom of tragic consequences stemming from it.

Being the adolescent daydreamer he was, Sid had only wanted the best. Along the way, though, he’d built up a pretty eclectic rap

sheet. Attempted bank robbery, resisting arrest in connection with the murder of a police officer, unauthorized possession of a firearm, several cases of coercion. Most recently, trespassing in a military institution, an escapade which was not only being considered a terrorist attack but had included *attempted* murder at the very least.

"It can't go on like this," Marshall repeated. "You're a good person, Sid. You mean well; I know that. But so far all you've done is cause more chaos." He held one hand upright and placed the other on top of it like a referee. "We need a time out, all right? And we need it now. Before it all... Honestly, I don't even know how it'll end otherwise."

Desperate for help, he glanced at Sue, who had put her arm stump around Sid's waist. The boy was staring at the ground. His shoulders twitched. He mumbled to himself. Only snippets were audible, continually interrupted by sobbing and panting.

"He can't... Looking for me... On the Moon he wouldn't have been able... Just want to get away from him... With the aliens I..."

Marshall gently grasped his upper arms and got down on his knees, putting their eyes on the same level. "Who is 'he,' Sid? Who is it you're so afraid of? What did he do to you? What he's called?"

"Clifford," Sid replied, suddenly crystal clear.

"What else? What's his surname? Tell me. Please!"

Sid screamed shrilly and writhed as if Marshall's last, harmless word had hit him like an electric shock. Then he slumped to the ground.

Marshall caught him. He tried to pull the gun out of Sid's belt, but the boy's hand had clenched around the grip so hard that he would have had to break his fingers. Sweat dripped from his forehead. A few meters above them, a bird cawed angrily.

What now?

Sue—small, crippled, and so impressively practically inclined Sue—took the tablet out of Sid's bag and tapped the screen a few

times.

“Just what I was afraid of,” she said. “There’s a large-scale manhunt against us. They’ve put out an alert all across the country. Any information that leads to our capture will earn a reward of thirty thousand dollars. There are piles of photos of us from all different angles. The security camera in the NASA control tower’s lobby. And what the FBI and Homeland Security are claiming about us is not flattering. We’re unhinged loose cannons and criminal masterminds all at the same time.”

Groaning, Sid cooled down. His first glance was at the pistol, and his second bore straight into Marshall’s eyes. He wore a look of naked fear. “Help me, John.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do all along. But you have to *let* me help you, Spark.” He consciously used the nickname coined for the youth by the other residents of the Pain Shelter. It had proven to be alarmingly fitting. “We need to take it slow. Step by step. We’re on the run. A few things went to hell… Well, basically everything did, but that’s beside the point. Turning ourselves in wouldn’t make sense right now.” The rumors that circulated about Homeland Security’s interrogation methods were less than pleasant. “We’re all agree on that point, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Yes,” Sue confirmed as well. “On top of that, both of you are in poor health. John because of your wound, and Sid because you’re not eating enough. Although I’m not totally sure if you could ever eat as many calories as you burn with one single teleportation.”

“We stay together,” Marshall assured them. “And free. Independent. Just as long as we don’t cause any more chaos. Are you listening, Spark? We have to hide and let ourselves recover. Stay underground a few days and wait it out. Otherwise we’ll soon have a catastrophe on our hands. This palm house won’t work as a hideout, so we need to find somewhere better, somewhere far away from the hustle and bustle. Can you imagine a place like that?”

“I don’t know…”

“Take your time.”

But Sid didn’t take any time. On the contrary, he jumped and jumped and jumped. From here to there, from one inhospitable location to the next. A vacant industrial park. A mothballed station on a disused local train line. Garbage dumps, scrap yards, and more garbage dumps. Restricted areas where barbed wire fences and weathered signs warned against chemical or radioactive contamination.

John Marshall gained first-hand experience of the other side of the silver dollar. This facet of the United States was something he knew was there, lurking; this was exactly why he’d founded the shelter. Still, he’d never quite come to grips with the whole truth. There was enough waste, enough misery, to fill a whole continent at least.

They didn’t find a long-term refuge. Sid González jumped and jumped, often multiple times in quick succession. As he did, he grew ever thinner. He was losing weight at an alarming pace. His cheeks were sunken; he had dark circles under his eyes. This was no state for rational thought.

Despite all of Marshall’s psychological endeavors, Sid remained distrustful. He wouldn’t engage in any long or detailed conversations. Whenever night fell, he left John and Sue somewhere in the wilderness, teleported away, and didn’t come back until morning. Where he’d been and what he’d done there, he didn’t say. But each time he returned, he looked even more woeful.

Marshall *sensed* that the boy’s fear was consuming him. His emotions were taking it out of him just as much as the constant use of his parapsychic ability. He wasn’t eating, drinking, or sleeping enough. In the time they spent together, Sue’s best healing efforts weren’t enough to make up for Sid’s depletion of his own body. He was slipping away from them, becoming more erratic and unpredictable by the day and less like the lovable teenager he had once been. In the same unnaturally rapid manner he crossed spatial distances, he was skipping over phases of adolescence. Sid was coming of age—but far too suddenly for him to handle it mentally.

It was only a question of time before he breached the final barrier.

John Marshall racked his brain, but it was futile. He saw no way to prevent Sid from plunging himself and all three of them into disaster.

On the evening of July 1, they made their camp in a small juniper forest. Marshall found an acceptably flat spot to camp, swept the biggest stones to the side with his shoe, then unrolled the sleeping bag Sid had obtained from who knew where. When he stripped off his sweat-drenched shirt, by now in pretty bad shape, about to hang it on a branch to dry, something slid out of his breast pocket and fell to the ground.

Marshall bent down and picked it up. An old-fashioned business card. *Homer G. Adams*, it read. *CEO, General Cosmic Company.* There was also a phone number. It was quite smudged by now, but still just about legible.

At this point, Marshall was desperate enough to grasp at straws and ask Adams for help. However, there were a lot of factors standing in the way. First, he didn't have a telephone handy; the tablet's battery had given up the ghost two days earlier. Sid had wanted to throw it away, but Sue kept the now-useless device with her, perhaps as a symbolic connection to civilization.

Secondly, even if he did manage to contact the mysterious Brit with the hunched back, he wouldn't have been able to tell him where they were. Not even which state they were in. Based on the landscape and vegetation, anywhere in the southwest was a possibility, from California to Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico all the way to their home state of Texas. And lastly, he didn't know where Sid would take them the next day.

Marshall sighed deeply and put the card in the back pocket of his jeans. He turned around and jumped with fright. He had almost collided with Sid, who was standing there unexpectedly as if from nowhere. The boy stared at him with bloodshot eyes that looked out from a face now lacking in all soft smoothness. He said nothing; merely chewed hard on his lower lip.

“Something on your mind, Spark?”

The boy’s thoughts were racing too turbulently to glean much from them. However, beneath the surface lurked a new, comparatively steady undercurrent. It felt like the boy had made a tough decision.

“Yeah. I have to tell you something.”

“Let me guess,” said Sue, walking over to them. “There’s nothing to eat except cold beans?”

“No, no.” Sid pulled some cans out of his burlap sack. “We also have wieners or chili…”

Marshall waved a hand. “That’s great. But you had something else to bring up, right?” The teen grunted affirmatively. “Well?”

“I’ve…I’ve been thinking. I’ve realized running away won’t solve anything. Like you said, John.” He shuffled about on the spot and took a deep breath. “Unless I can get to the Moon, and I can’t. Down here…he’ll find me sooner or later no matter what. With or without help from the police, the FBI, and Homeland Security.”

“You mean that Clifford guy? Is he really on such good terms with the bureaus?” Marshall sensed an almost painfully clear answer from Sid. *Yes*. He also sensed how carefully he had to tread with this topic.

Sid wavered, stiffening as if this was already too much for him. Isolated specks of light appeared at his fingertips.

“No, Spark! Stay here, I’m begging you. You wanted to confide in us about something. That’s what you decided.”

“Yes. Exactly. John, Sue… I’m going to go to him.”

Sue grasped his wrist to calm him down and also to reassure him that she wouldn’t abandon him. “Where is he?”

The sun’s last rays painted a glowing red aura around the two youths’ silhouettes as it descended behind the jagged rock

formations. Clumsily, Sid put an arm around Sue's skinny shoulders.

"Where?" she repeated.

"In the one place," he began, swallowing several times as if fighting the impulse to throw up, "that I never, ever wanted to go back to."

"But not right now, right?"

"No. First thing tomorrow."

"You'll take us with you."

The boy hesitated. He pulled away from the embrace and brushed off Sue's hand as well.

"Spark!" Marshall cried. "Where is this place?"

All he received in response was a desperately unhappy gaze and a swarm of golden sparks.

9.

Paths, Tunnels, and Roads

July 1 and 2, 2036

The infernal roar of countless fighter jets had faded to a distant roll of thunder, then finally a mere echo. Aside from the soft babbling of a stream far below, all was silent.

“I think the plan’s gone off without a hitch so far,” said Manoli, keeping his tone muted even though he couldn’t hear any signs of life nearby other than Crest. “Flipper did his part. The enemy didn’t notice that he wasn’t alone or the time and place where we split up. We’re free and clear. Even so, we shouldn’t stay here longer than we have to.”

“Agreed.” It was clear from the Arkonide’s voice that it hurt him to speak. Despite this, he drew himself up and, held up straight by the battledress, took a few unsteady steps closer to the tunnel wall, where some kind of plaque had been carved into the rock face. “What does this mean?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t read the Chinese characters.”

“But your suit can, or more precisely its Positronic,” Crest explained with the faintest hint of reproach. “I highly recommend you take the opportunity to deepen your knowledge of its functions. We might find ourselves relying on them, and I don’t know how long I’ll be in a fit state to offer my aid.”

Shame rose in Manoli for a moment; he suddenly felt like a kid at school being unjustly accused of something. Then he couldn’t help but laugh. At himself, at the ridiculous situation, but also as an expression of admiration at how carefully and charmingly the elderly, mortally ill Arkonide had phrased his rebuke.

“It takes verbal orders, right? Camera on... Capture segment... Analyze script and translate into English...and display. Bingo!”

With feeble arms, Crest delivered an attempt at applause. “See? It’s quite easy. You just have to push yourself to take the first step into unknown territory.”

“How right you are! Even the doctor assigned to a space mission can tend to get stuck following the beaten path sometimes.”

“You’re a pleasantly teachable student.”

“Thanks, teach!” Manoli read out the translation that had appeared on the screen inside his helmet. According to the inscription, they were standing in the Guoliang Tunnel, which had been carved by residents of the closest village on their own initiative. Until 1972, the only way in had been a precarious climbing path. Then the villagers had decided to build a tunnel. Spurred on by their chief, Shen Mingxin, they’d sold everything they could do without—mainly goats and medicinal herbs—to raise funds for hammers, pickaxes, and other tools. Thirteen strong men had worked tirelessly for five years until they’d carved out a tunnel 1.2 kilometers long, with a width and height of roughly four and a half meters and more than thirty “windows” to let in light. Some had lost their lives in the process. On May 1, 1977, the tunnel had officially opened to traffic.

“An impressive memorial to human willfulness,” Crest commented. “I confess I envy you for this tremendous vigor and obstinacy. You’re so *young*, so fresh... I don’t know a single Arkonide who would take on a task like that. Well, perhaps one, and she is very dear to my heart, but...”

Crest looked close to losing himself in thought, so Manoli subtly stressed the urgency of their situation.

“You have a severe fever. We have to find a medical facility where your infection can be treated.”

“Of course. Do you already have a destination in mind?”

“More or less. China rules itself out. Their territory is enormous, but if we go near any centers with the infrastructure for it, we’ll immediately be caught up in a highly developed surveillance

network. There's another big country to the south, though, where we have better chances of not getting caught straight away. India."

Crest da Zoltral giggled.

"Sorry, I don't understand," said Manoli.

"It was the term 'country.' You must excuse me, young man, for being amused by the division of your planet into nation states that is taken so exceedingly seriously here. The symptoms are known to me from the archives, but I never expected I'd have the opportunity to observe them myself."

"Things always seem to happen when you least expect them."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Uhm, it's just a thing people say."

"To justify a lack of foresight, I assume?"

"That's as good an explanation as any. I guess you see things on a larger scale in your Imperium, then?"

"We start laughing if the neighboring solar systems in a sector start emphasizing their separate local patriotism."

"And *you're* envious of *us*?"

"Not in that regard. I'm very tired, Dr. Manoli. Will the flight be much longer?"

"About four thousand kilometers as the crow flies, roughly calculated. Given your condition, we'll have to take regular breaks on top of that."

"Not necessarily. The battledresses' Positronics can automatically coordinate with one another."

"Like a kind of battlefield network?"

The Arkonide answered in the affirmative. Then he squinted, his

eyelids flickering. “You take control. I’ll sleep. First I’ll just explain how to synchronize the propulsion units.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

Crest was a teacher, and a good one. That made it all the more important that he survived and could remain a mentor to mankind.

After a few teething problems, Manoli managed to activate the relevant settings. He and Crest, a short distance apart, floated out of the nearest window of the Guoliang Tunnel. The sensors showed no sign of other flying objects nearby.

The doctor and the most exotic, most significant patient he’d ever taken into his care began their long journey to India.

Manoli had never seen himself as a hero. His role was that of a healer, just like in one of the age-old but still prevalent video games where one party member had to patch up the other heroes if they got overly daring and took too much damage. He liked his role. Maybe it was because of the movies he’d grown up with. The protagonists always had a fight for whatever reason, leading someone to cry, “Is there a doctor in the house?” And then someone stepped in, got out their medical tools, and healed all wounds.

That was why he’d studied medicine. For that one moment, he’d worked his way through dissection courses, chemistry exams, and training in internal medicine; surgery, and all kinds of specialist subjects. Just so that when the call came—“Is there a doctor in the house?”—he’d be ready. Only, the chance to show off all the knowledge he’d acquired never really came. An instructor had sung his praises about Manoli’s remarkably resilient physical and mental constitution, and had pushed him—no, practically shoved him into pursuing a career as an astronaut.

Eric Manoli had become an onboard doctor on manned space flights on a whim, almost just to see if he could, to demonstrate to the system that it was fallible and easy to outwit. He had casually made it through all the grisly horrors of NASA’s training just because he wanted to find out what his tormentors intended, what

criteria they set, what performance they demanded from their recruits.

Then he found himself sitting in the *Stardust* and flying to the Moon with Perry Rhodan, personally feeling very underprepared. The moon and back. Four men in a tiny little tin can of a space craft. More accurately, two men plus two others along for the ride.

Bull and Rhodan understood each other implicitly. When they reached a decision in their eternal game of ping-pong, they shared it with their crewmates. Theoretically, they allowed the others a veto, but neither Manoli nor Flipper would have dreamed of making use of that. In the end, Perry Rhodan knew what was best for everyone, and Reginald Bull made it clear with his physical presence alone that he would stand behind his best friend and, if necessary, take out any opposition.

"We're flying to the limits of our imagination," Rhodan had said once. "Who's coming with?"

Now Eric Manoli was flying in an Arkonide battledress, crossing unnoticed over national borders that had been defended to the death for decades. Crest had fallen asleep, as he'd said. Despite everything, Manoli had to restrain the impulse to pinch himself. The Arkonide didn't have to make a single sound or move a muscle; his mere existence was enough to shatter the doctor's entire worldview. There was no such thing as aliens; that was as basic a fact as "two plus two equals four." Mankind was alone in the cosmos; the rest, no matter how incomprehensibly vast, was just window-dressing, an empty backdrop.

Or so I thought.

Crest, decrepit though he was, proved exactly the opposite. Somewhere out there among the stars, there was life. Intelligent, highly advanced life, not just a few microbes. No, the aliens had landed on the Moon, and they'd brought highly sophisticated technology with them.

The four astronauts chosen by fate to make first contact had each reacted to the experience in very different ways. Clark Flipper

didn't realize he was part of a historical turning point. He was too caught up in his personal anguish. Bull had accepted the circumstances as stoically and stubbornly as he did everything else, happy as long as he got to tinker with new technology.

Perry Rhodan, meanwhile, hadn't spent long ruminating. He'd simply started a new chapter of an endless book, a novel with his name on the front cover. Rhodan was convinced, all modesty aside, that he would inherit the universe one day!

Based on what? Manoli wondered. In his mind, he heard Rhodan's answer: "Based on nothing. There's nothing bigger than nothing, right? That's what space is: an endless void of nothingness with a few specks of interest being fought over for no reason."

"On the other hand, these miniscule islands of life add up to myriads in our galaxy alone." These were words Manoli recalled from a lecture he'd once attended. The professor had had an absolutely captivating figure paired with exceptionally noticeable facial hair for a woman.

"Consider that the average of ten to the power of twenty-seven atoms composing each of your bodies have previously flown through thousands of suns and belonged to countless life forms. Ten billion of them, statistically speaking, were relatively recently a part of Leonardo da Vinci, Genghis Khan, Cleopatra, Buddha, Beethoven, or any well-known figure on the planet. Not Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, or Alkmene Begodan, though. It'll still take a few more decades before their molecules are in circulation again."

Eric Manoli and Crest da Zoltral, two very short-lived life-forms by cosmic standards, took just thirty hours to get to Bengaluru.

"Is life in India more relaxed than in China?" Crest asked as they flew at reduced speed over the less densely populated areas of the state of Karnataka.

"I wouldn't say that, necessarily. For example, their social lives are determined by a traditional caste system. Officially it's a thing of the past, but it's still there. This'll amuse you again, but in this

country, there are still huge numbers of people who firmly believe they have special rights purely based on their genealogical background. I assume the Arkonides have long since moved past that kind of primitive attitude."

"Not...entirely. Quite the opposite, to be honest with you. Our society is highly feudal. As a philosopher of history, I would assert that every society, no matter how it is constructed, evolves to have quasi-oligarchical structures after a long enough period of peace. That may be dissatisfying to people like me and you, but so says the scientific evidence. I myself am of noble origin, and indeed, this has eased my way at several points in my life."

"Frankly, I'm a little disappointed."

"We Arkonides are no angels. No more than you humans are."

"Terrans," Manoli corrected.

"Either way. Still, at least your people still know how to pick up a hammer and chisel."

"You make it sound like yours have lost all grip on reality."

"But that's exactly how they behave! We control a significant portion of this galaxy. Nominally, at least. Our sphere of influence encompasses... Well, it would be pointless to count up every sun and settled world. Regardless of all that, we..."

"Yes?"

"We've lost sight of the most basic principles of life."

"That your metabolism requires a supply of sustenance at regular intervals, for instance?" Manoli imitated his patient's rather didactic tone.

"You've caught me. I, like the others, have a criminal tendency to forget about my own bodily needs now and again. In our deep space vessels, everything is so perfectly regulated, so impeccably and thoroughly organized by the computers..."

“Sir, as your doctor,” said Manoli, softly but emphatically, “I recommend that you immediately avail yourself of your suit’s supplies.” As he recalled, they carried provision for five days in the form of a highly concentrated nutrient solution. “Please eat and drink even if you have to force yourself. A certain degree of nausea is a symptom of your condition.”

“I didn’t expect such sternness from you.”

“Oh you didn’t, did you? I swore to see this through, Crest da Zoltral. By whatever means necessary.” Manoli clapped his chest, where his lucky charm was hidden underneath. “Think of the residents of Guoliang. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. If it comes down to it, I’ll sell all my goats for a single pickaxe.”

10.

The Road Runner and the Coyote

The night of July 1 to 2, 2036

After they'd eaten dinner, Sue Mirafiore asked, "What's bothering you, John? I mean, apart from..." She waved her arm stump in a way that encompassed the entire world. "Everything?"

When he didn't answer straight away, she added, "I don't have to be a mind reader to know something's up."

Marshall made a face. Since Sid's disappearance, he'd been weighing the arguments for and against telling Sue about his plan. Was it better to wait until she was asleep and then secretly slip away? He could palm her off with a half-truth. But hadn't she earned the right to his complete confidence, even if he made her into an accomplice in the process?

"I'm going to go behind Sid's back," he confessed at last. "Do you remember the old, hunched man with the British accent who came on your last tour of the Pain Shelter?" How long ago that felt! It had barely been a week and a half since then.

"Of course. He stood out from the rest. You don't just forget a guy like that."

"His name's Homer G. Adams, and he offered me his help. Under totally different circumstances, but it was a serious offer. I think he's a good person."

"Did you..."

"Pick up on his thoughts? No. I didn't even sense his feelings beyond knowing that he wasn't intentionally lying to me. I hadn't developed far enough at that point." Back when his small world had still been in one piece, relatively speaking... He pulled himself back to the present. "I want to try to contact this Adams guy and tell him

our location. I'm sorry, it's the only option I can think of."

"But how? The tablet's as dead as a doornail. Plus we don't know where we are or where Sid's planning to go tomorrow."

"He *thought* something before he jumped," Marshall said slowly. "Involuntarily but very intensely. After, I asked him about it directly. Four words that made up two place names. I'm not sure if I should tell you them."

"What are you trying to protect me from?" She put her arms on her hips. "It's time to stop treating me like a little kid, John Marshall!"

"Sorry. The place that Sid remembers so fondly is called *Camp Specter*. And it's in *Narco County*."

"Oh, Jesus."

He put the tablet in his pocket along with a few chocolate bars, then gently hugged Sue goodbye. "Bye, beautiful. I'll be back an hour before dawn at the latest. Scout's honor!"

"Take good care of yourself, John."

Better care than he'd taken of his charges at the shelter. But those were *his* bitter thoughts, not hers. "I will. I promise."

In truth, it was a crazy, if not terminally irresponsible, choice to head out into the night on a wing and a prayer. The southwest had plenty of uninhabited and inhospitable wasteland. To his knowledge, more or less everywhere populated was close to the highways and their feeder roads. No matter how intently he listened, he couldn't hear any sounds of traffic through the silence. Sid apparently followed the decree of "far away from the hustle and bustle" to the letter.

Nonetheless, he had to try. He needed to find either a way to charge the tablet or some other means of communication. He owed that to himself and the pair under his protection. Including, and especially, the sixteen-year-old teleporter, even though—if Marshall

did find success against all odds—he would be committing a betrayal against him.

If.

Realistically, the chances were basically zero anyway. His promise to Sue gave him a maximum of three hours before he had to turn back. He could still detect her location pretty precisely with his sixth sense, even if he couldn't bring himself to delve into her thoughts.

Sue was worried; that much he could tell. It was, of course, no surprise. Apart from that, deathly silence reigned in the mental ether, or whatever he was supposed to call the paranormal channel that he'd recently gained access to. That is to say, apart from Sue and himself, he couldn't detect anyone capable of thought in the nearby area.

He could see more clearly than he'd dared to hope, however. Thousands of stars glimmered in the cloudless sky. He could even make out the long belt of the Milky Way's central plane. Somewhere far beyond those stars—among them, in fact—might be the place the Arkonides had come from.

Why? What were they looking for on Earth's Moon? Right now, that same Moon was almost full, and its soft, bluish light had transformed Marshall's surroundings into a surreal wonderland, oddly flat and divided by sharp shadows. It was inconceivable, truly hard to grasp, that a starship was parked up there. A vehicle that had crossed the immense distances between solar systems! The ship belonging to the aliens with whom Major Perry Rhodan had made an agreement, and in whom Sid González had, vainly, placed so much hope.

Marshall made every effort to keep from losing himself in thought and instead take note of landmarks to help him make the return journey: memorable rock formations that faced each other on the left and right of the broad valley; distinctive twists and turns in the dry riverbed that he was following, stamping firmly with each step to scare off any rattlesnakes before they came too close. Or whatever other wildlife might be roaming among the cacti and

yuccas. Poisonous lizards or scorpions? Better not to think about it. For all he knew, his empathetic ability was even drawing them to him.

Since *not* thinking about it was proving an impossible challenge, he focused on what he'd learned at school about more innocent fauna. If he recalled correctly, this neck of the woods was also home to the greater roadrunner, a long-legged cuckoo known for running along the ground. This creature was the inspiration for the Road Runner cartoon character, whose always-successful escapes from Wile E. Coyote had delighted generations of American children. Whatever plans the mean coyote came up with, and whatever ingenious traps he laid with gear from the Acme Corporation, he inevitably ended up falling victim to them himself much to the viewers' amusement.

Marshall had loved those cartoon shorts. He doubted that he and his companions would escape any pursuers so easily. Even so, the association gave him a modicum of confidence.

The first hour of his aimless journey passed, then the second. He'd set out not long after 9:30. By now, both hands on his wristwatch were approaching the top of the face.

Midnight in the middle of nowhere, he thought.

That sounded like a promising title for a horror novel or the average episode of one of the many supernatural TV shows circulating online that tried to draw the viewers' attention with cheap special effects. Based on the plots of those shoddy efforts, he should have been surrounded by vampires, werewolves, or some other hellspawn by now, and they'd be salivating and sharpening their razor-sharp claws, ready to attack.

But there was nothing there. Nothing but grass swaying in the balmy wind and various kinds of conifers exuding a piney scent. Even at this late hour, they were still perceptibly giving off the heat they'd stored up during the day. Red berries hung on some of them.

He started to feel hungry. Without stopping, he ate one of his

chocolate bars. He neatly folded up the wrapper and put in his left front pocket, which had so far been empty. When he realized the pointlessness of this act, he came close to laughing out loud. He was a pedant all right, and a laughably uptight dogooder. As if the cosmos, bearing witness with its endless expanse of stars, would have somehow taken a turn for the worse if he'd just tossed the packaging.

While he was still chuckling quietly in amusement, he was struck by sudden, overwhelming fear. Fear, confusion, and uncertainty. The area around him abruptly turned into foreign, dangerous terrain. It stank of skulduggery, of barely contained bloodlust lurking nearby.

Marshall froze and lifted his arms, suddenly very conscious of the fact that he was unarmed and defenseless. He crouched and looked in all directions, bracing himself for an attack that could come at any moment. It took a few breaths for him to understand that he wasn't the one in fear. Someone else felt threatened. Someone whose dread was so great that his subconscious had sent out a silent cry for help that Marshall had received.

A connection had formed, a parapsychic rapport. Marshall listened to the voice inside of himself, and the one outside of himself as well. The person whose ghostly, intensely alarmed presence had breached the cold emptiness of the ether was...a little ways south. A kilometer and a half, maybe two, he reckoned. Roughly.

His watch showed twenty-five minutes past midnight. What to do? In five minutes, he'd have to turn back if he wanted to keep his promise to Sue. Or he could keep going. He could turn away from the path he'd followed and into the tributary valley, more of a gorge reached via a three-meter-wide entryway that he'd have overlooked entirely if not for the mental impulses surging towards him from that direction.

Nos hacen trampas. ¡Nos van a matar!

John Marshall hardly knew a word of Spanish. On his parents' advice, he'd picked Chinese to study in high school instead. But at

this moment he realized he would never need to rely on a foreign language phrasebook ever again. The intent behind the thoughts reached him on a level beyond vocabulary and grammar: *They're cheating us. They're going to kill us!*

The woman whose thoughts were so imploring had been baptized with the name Confesión. "Confession," but also "faith" or "creed." She wasn't physically bound at all, but she saw herself as a prisoner at the mercy of some bad people and was sure to meet a terrible fate. At the same time, she was annoyed that there was nothing on the radio except for hillbilly stations. Confesión *hated* hillbilly music.

If there was a radio, it followed that there was electricity, which was what Marshall needed urgently for the tablet. That left him no choice but to follow the trail of her thoughts, didn't it?

His helper syndrome had already made the decision for him. John Marshall had long since broken into a run.

The gorge opened up only rarely, at most into cirques measuring five or six meters across, the mouths of which were jammed with logs and branches of various sizes and colors. These obstacles had been washed up during past downpours but were now bone dry. More than once, he pricked himself on thorns or scraped himself on sharp edges. Soon he was bleeding from countless small cuts on his hands, arms, and lower legs.

Confesión was praying. *Santa Maria de la merced y San Cristóforo, ceden a mis ruegos...* She begged the Virgin Mary and Saint Christopher to hear her pleas. Well, help was on the way, but what Marshall could actually do remained to be seen.

The closer he came, the more clearly he could make out a second voice, as if hearing it through someone else's ears. *"No te preocupes, hermanita, hemos pagado dinero bastante, a no decir demasiado."*

They'd paid more than enough money, felt Confesión's companion (her brother, based on how he'd addressed her). His name was Jesús. Continuing, he explained that their guides would be shooting themselves in the foot if word got around that they'd broken their promises.

Fighting through ever more brittle, splintering wood, he made his way through the dark gorge; the walls drew together at the top so closely that even a cave couldn't have been much gloomier. In the slivers of moonlight that reached the ground, he could hardly see his hands in front of his face. This couldn't be the standard route to the building where the brother and sister waited, but a positive side effect of his arduous approach was that it gave him the element of surprise. No one would be expecting anyone to arrive from this direction.

More confident now, Marshall focused on the rock face to his left. The thoughts were coming from above, so he had to find a way to climb up. Thankfully, he spotted a rudimentary path leading upwards in a zigzag pattern. He stumbled after catching his shoe on something. He looked down and gasped for breath. Marshall had made a gruesome discovery.

There were bones on the ground that belonged to a human skeleton. No, to several skeletons. At least half a dozen, smashed to pieces. These people had evidently fallen into the gorge. Or they'd been pushed.

As he cautiously climbed the steep path, Marshall put two and two together. Confesión and her brother spoke Spanish and had a Catholic background. It followed that they were Mexican. Also, Jesús had mentioned guides they'd paid a large sum of money to. Most likely, this referred to smugglers who brought illegal immigrants into the United States.

The Mexico-United States border was over three thousand kilometers long, stretching from Brownsville and Matamoros in the east to San Diego and Tijuana in the west. About a quarter of a million people were estimated to cross it illegally every year. The majority of those were Mexican, although no small number of them came from other Latin American countries and merely used Mexico as a transit country. All had the same goal: to get to the US, which was still known as "the land of opportunity" even today, and to earn enough money to support themselves and the family members they'd left behind. One day, when they were financially secure, they hoped to return home.

It was a pipe dream that seldom came true. Immigrants with no official work permit earned only a fraction of the average wage for a US citizen, assuming their pay wasn't withheld entirely. Being illegal residents, they didn't dare try to involve the legal system. In many cases, the merciless exploitation began even earlier while they were still trying to physically enter the country.

As early as the 1960s, work had begun on making the border as impenetrable as possible. Around the turn of the millennium, the fences, steel walls, and frequent military patrols were joined by the so-called virtual wall, starting in Arizona. This consisted of countless towers equipped with the latest monitoring technology and staffed by troops who could be deployed at a moment's notice. The completion date was officially said to be 2038, but it had already been pushed back several times.

This meant that all migrants without the means to enter legally

had to take ever riskier paths. A border crossing was only possible in places where it was life-threateningly dangerous: through the Sonoran Desert, over the mountains, or through the Rio Grande. Year after year, hundreds of people died from snake and scorpion bites. Others drowned in the river, died of thirst after getting lost in the desert, or fell victim to bandits operating in the border region.

The great paradox of the situation, the thing that made it especially scandalous, was that the immigrants from south of the border were *needed* in the United States. Without them, the population would be in decline, and the Latin American workers were essential in various ways to the economy of the entire southwest. In particular, they were vital to the farming, gastronomy, and construction industries.

As employees, they were highly motivated, working hard towards their dream of a life without poverty. Perhaps more significantly, anyone who had entered illegally cost their employer pennies compared to a normal wage. This was the real reason the blood-soaked border was kept in place. If it was opened, and all willing and able immigrants received the right to live and work in the US, there would no longer be any bargain-priced manpower, and the earnings of shareholders and C-suite executives would be significantly reduced. That could not be allowed to happen under any circumstance, of course. Not in the oh-so-enlightened US of A, the democratic meritocracy so eager to paint itself as a bastion of human rights.

The blatant hypocrisy had made John Marshall's blood boil for decades. To enable a tiny fraction of society to grow richer and richer, the exploitation of the weakest was accepted as a matter of course. Thousands fell by the wayside before they even arrived, but everyone deliberately turned a blind eye. Marshall had heard that the smugglers who guided people through the border zone, known as "coyotes," earned three to five thousand dollars per person. Business was booming for them, and it only got better as the border became more heavily scrutinized. Even so, it was not uncommon for the coyotes to take off with the money and leave their clients to a grisly fate in the desert or the mountains. That was assuming they weren't already in cahoots with the bandits, who unscrupulously

ambushed, robbed, and murdered the migrants.

Was that what had happened to the poor souls whose skeletons were lying at the bottom of the gorge? And was that what lay in store for the siblings Jesús and Confesión?

As he got closer to the top, he had more light to see by. The path grew wider too. It led around an overhang and opened up into a vertical notch. Once Marshall had clambered up the inside of this, he reached the edge of the plateau. Less than two meters away loomed the windowless back wall of a shed. A few meters to the right, a diesel generator on wheels was chugging away, with a thick cable leading from it to the base of the building.

Marshall deployed his telepathic ability. Strangely, although he was now right next to the pair in the shed, he could detect their thoughts less clearly than before. He could locate and identify them without a shadow of a doubt, but he could hardly make out any specific details. Presumably, that was because their emotions had subsided by now. Emotional intensity seemed to be a factor that played a major role.

As Marshall's breathing and heart rate gradually returned to normal, he tried to figure out his next move. Could he just go in, state his business, and casually inform them about the skeletons in the gorge? Hmm. In his filthy attire, he didn't exactly look trustworthy. And if the siblings didn't speak any English, how would he make himself understood? *They* couldn't read *his* thoughts.

He scraped together the few Spanish phrases he could think of. *¡Hola! Soy John. Soy un hombre bueno. Necesito…* He wanted to say "*batería*," but didn't that actually mean "drum kit"?

This had the potential to be very embarrassing. Also, Confesión already distrusted the smugglers transporting them. What good would it do for Marshall to intensify her suspicions? What alternative did he have to offer? It almost came as a relief when the decision was taken out of his hands. The sound of an engine pierced the nighttime silence—a vehicle was approaching from the gently

sloping plateau beyond the shed.

Crouching, Marshall ran to the generator, lay flat on the ground, and peered through its rubber wheels. The off-road vehicle, painted with a camouflage pattern, was parked next to the shed and switched off. Two long radio antennas on the left and right glimmered in the moonlight. The driver pulled the key out of the ignition and got out. He was a wiry, middle-aged man with dark skin, wearing a cowboy hat, a green uniform jacket, and black boots with high heels and a rich array of silver ornaments adorning them. The man went around to the front of the building, at which point Marshall lost sight of him. A creaking door opened without any audible knock beforehand. This was soon followed by a passionate torrent of words in a high-pitched woman's voice.

Marshall decided he'd stick to observing for now. He scurried to the side of the building and pressed himself against the wall to eavesdrop audibly as well as telepathically.

"Thank the Blessed Virgin Mary, you're finally back! Where have you been all this time? You said you'd go get the car and come right back. We've been really worried. Can we finally be on our way?"

"Simmer down, kid. We're not talking about a school trip here. It's crawling with Yankee patrols out there tonight. My guys are doing what they can to scout out a safe route. It might take a while longer."

"What? How long?"

"Like I said, it depends. Could go quick, or we could have to be patient another few hours. I'll get a signal when the time comes. Or someone might come and give us an escort. You know, because of the bandits."

The man was lying. He had a different reason for being late, he had no fear of any border patrols or bandits, and he also knew exactly when reinforcements would arrive. His task was to stall the pair until then.

"I'm hungry!"

“Quit your whining. Chew on your fingernails if you have to. Soon you’ll be in the land of milk and honey, and all your worries will be gone.”

As he said this, the coyote thought about the gorge behind the building. Marshall couldn’t access anything more specific than that; any deeper thoughts and memories were still blurry to him. At any rate, the man was certain he had the situation well in hand. He kept as much emotional distance from his charges as possible and had little sympathy to spare for them.

One thing was clear: time was marching on. Even without a real plan, Marshall had to intervene now, while there was only this one coyote to deal with. His greatest asset was the surprise factor. He couldn’t squander that. So he crept along the back of the shed with painstaking care to avoid giving himself up. When he turned the corner, his hopes were not dashed. Among the overflowing garbage cans and piles of junk, there was a side entrance.

Cautiously, he tried the handle. It turned. The door was not locked. Marshall was about to enter when he happened to spot an iron crowbar leaning against a wooden crate. With a certain degree of reluctance, he picked up the tool, knowing it could serve as a weapon if it really came down to it. He wanted to avoid any violence if at all possible, though the coyote didn’t give any impression of having similar scruples.

Marshall silently slipped into the room, which appeared to be a lovelessly furnished combination of office and workshop. The only light source was a computer monitor, on which a naked, busty beauty with garish makeup served as a screensaver. Her full lips moved as if blowing an endless stream of kisses.

Loud hillbilly music blared from the next room. Confesión protested against this, but the coyote shouted, telling her to keep her mouth shut. Jesús saw it as his duty to demand more respect for his sister, but all this earned was a derisive laugh. The power imbalance was obvious; the siblings were entirely dependent on the smuggler and his buddies, and he enjoyed making sure they knew it. To put it another way, now that they’d handed over the money, they didn’t have much left to offer him.

“I’m going to check on their progress,” the coyote informed them.

He actually wanted to look up the baseball scores. Either way, the door separating the two rooms flew open, and he entered the side room.

Marshall’s foreknowledge had only won him a few seconds, but it had been enough. Barely. He’d hidden himself between two metal lockers, his back pressed against the wall. He lay in wait in the dark alcove, crowbar raised. The coyote didn’t notice him even when he walked past only meters away. It would have been easy as pie to bring the iron tool down onto the man’s skull. But John Marshall couldn’t bring himself to do it. How many times had he impressed upon the children at the Pain Shelter that you didn’t solve problems with a crowbar? That if you used your brain instead of your fists, you’d find a better way? “Always?” he’d been asked. “Always.”

Should he break his own rule? It didn’t matter. He’d missed his chance anyway.

No, the chance was still there. After slamming the door closed with his heel, the coyote sat down on a chair and used the computer. Steel guitars and harmonicas caterwauled in the next room. Marshall shuffled out of his corner. Gingerly, as if walking on eggshells, he put one foot in front of the other. He needn’t have tried so hard; the music covered his approach, the floor vibrating to the beat of the bass drum.

Then he was standing directly behind the coyote. Again, he should have struck—if only he could! The man before him, who was casually studying play-by-plays and results tables, was probably a murderer. Even if he hadn’t gotten his own hands dirty, he certainly had no objections to being an accessory to murder. The fact that he knew about the skeletons in the gorge was proof enough of that. Wasn’t it?

Or was Marshall mistaken? Had he imagined this whole horror story? Maybe there was another explanation. Maybe the ones who had plunged into the gorge had been traveling without a guide and fallen in accidentally. On a cloudy, moonless night, you could easily overlook the chasm, which from up here was a fissure only a few

meters wide. So many people all at once, though? Maybe they were running in a panic from military patrols.

He realized that his inner dialogue, with its endless, cowardly back and forth, served no purpose but to put off the decision he inevitably had to make. And it had to be him and no one else. In frivolous stories about heroes, the bad guy always attacked the good guy, who then had no choice but to act in self-defense and overpower the other. But the coyote wouldn't be so kind. He was about half a head shorter than Marshall, but he was muscular and well-toned, and no doubt far more experienced in close-quarters combat.

So use your advantage while you still have it. Hit him already! urged a part of him. Another part replied, *No, I won't betray my convictions.* A third began to develop a theory that Marshall's newly developed telepathic abilities were essentially a form of schizophrenia.

The music suddenly fell silent, cutting off in the middle of a guitar solo. Confesión had finally gotten fed up and switched off the radio in spite of her younger brother's objections.

The coyote sat up, annoyed. He would turn around at any moment. John Marshall had to act. It was now or never.

"Not a sound!" he hissed, pressing the crowbar's sharp end sideways against the coyote's throat. "Stay right where you are. Don't move a muscle and you'll get through this unharmed."

As he spoke, he opened his mind to absorb the man's thoughts. Shock, agitation, and terrible fear streamed into him, balled up so tightly that it threatened to overpower him. But he couldn't let himself crumble. He had to follow through before his opponent recovered from his initial surprise.

"You don't know me," Marshall whispered, "but I know everything about you. Every single detail, you got that? Your name, for starters."

Joaquín García, thought the coyote involuntarily. And not just that.

“Joaquín García,” Marshall repeated. “But your buddies call you Fast Jack because you’re so quick with a knife.” A weight fell from his shoulders. The trick had worked. Not least because Jack the coyote understood English perfectly. That stood to reason, since he operated on both sides of the border.

“I know when and where you were born, too.” The information flowed clearly and easily now. “In Ciudad Juárez, on March 12, 1998,” Marshall echoed. His words were having a palpable effect. Now he just had to keep up the pressure! “Your cowboy boots. Do you still remember where you bought them and how much you paid for them? I can tell you. At Brooks & Meyerhold in El Paso, for the princely sum of 124 dollars and 90 cents. Quite a bargain for a collector’s piece.”

Jack García gasped. He began to reply, but Marshall wasn’t about to let him regain the initiative, even for a moment. “How do I know all that? Because we’ve been watching you for a long time, Fast Jack. We have an interest in you. We’re evaluating you, if you catch my drift. To see if you have what it takes. Now, who do you think sent me?”

The coyote’s thoughts raced in all directions at once. He belonged to a mafia-like organization where power struggles and intrigues were the order of the day. He had only limited insight into the higher levels of leadership. The names of some string-pullers raced through his head. They were people he respected highly, and he didn’t put any kind of dirty trick past them.

Marshall gratefully took advantage. “If you’re thinking of Sheriff O’Reilly, Doña Imelda, or the lieutenant, you’re thinking too small. They act all high and mighty, but they’re small fry. I get my orders from much higher up. *Right* at the top. And one of those orders is to get a bit more hands-on with Fast Jack García.”

The man wrestled with contradictory impulses. On the one hand, he wanted to turn around as quickly as possible, to see who was threatening him and better estimate his own chances in a fight. On the other, he’d heard rumors of a lone assassin sworn to the most senior godfathers. He was called the “Faceless One”—because if you ever saw his face, it was already too late.

Directly identifying himself as the Faceless One felt a little on-the-nose to Marshall. It also risked making García decide to make a last, desperate stand, figuring he was dead otherwise anyway. Already, he was debating which of his knives he could pull most quickly. The one in his pocket, the one in his shoulder holster, or the one in his left boot leg?

"Put the knives on the ground, Jack. All three of them. It's for your own good. You wouldn't want to get funny ideas and do something stupid."

The coyote obeyed.

"Yes, good man. I don't want to hurt you if I don't have to. You're good as long as you keep your head and prove to me that we're not wrong about you."

The man was burning with a desire to serve. Marshall pulled the crowbar away.

"Keep an ear to the ground. There are big changes on the way. The top dogs aren't happy with how things have been going. Far too many slip-ups for far too long. The organization's in urgent need of streamlining."

Secretly, John Marshall was amazed by how easily these phrases flowed from his tongue. Then he realized why. During his time as an investment banker, he'd overheard the same thing dozens of times. It was exactly this kind of intimidation, following the same formula: making veiled threats, generating insecurity, invoking higher authorities. The financial managers who brought politicians to heel had by no means discovered the methods themselves. They'd borrowed them wholesale from religious groups who acted the same way on a global scale. His disgust with it all was one of the reasons he had left that world behind him.

Now he was drawing on exactly that, and it almost gave him a guilty conscience. Still, if he wanted to help Confesión and Jesús, he'd had to know more about the background of this man. Belatedly, he realized that in the process, he'd been able to use his telepathic ability in a truly targeted way; a truly successful way, for

the first time.

"Your underboss who's on the way here. What's he called again? Oh yes, Ruben Tresmolinos. 'El Comandante.' Not that he'll be commanding much of anything soon."

The coyote's shoulders sank in relief. García was rejoicing—they weren't coming after him but rather the boss of his smuggling band, who he didn't care all that much about anyway. Truthfully, El Comandante treated his henchmen like garbage. Fast Jack would gladly let the Faceless One do away with him—and the latter had made it clear that there was every chance the boss's replacement would be Fast Jack Himself. All of a sudden, the future was looking a hell of a lot rosier.

It was time for Marshall to bring it home. "Tresmolinos is doing too much lining of his own pockets. He doesn't see the bigger picture. I'm sure that's been just as obvious to you."

Yes! Of course! For sure! No question! No sense of the bigger picture at all, that bastard!

Before García could express his unconditional agreement verbally as well, Marshall continued, "Take that brother and sister in the next room, for example. We both know what Tresmolinos is going to do with them, right?" He read the coyote's thoughts, suppressed a shudder, and repeated what he'd heard. "Little Jesús is going off the cliff. He's no use to anyone, so into the gorge with him. Confesión will be sold to a brothel in Dallas. And roll credits."

Jack was confused. What could be wrong with that?

"But Tresmolinos has completely overlooked that the girl is a highly gifted singer. She's heading to the United States to make her fortune. And she will, if the right people are looking out for her—and that'll mean far bigger profits than a plain-jane whore will get you. Bigger picture, Jack! She loves her little brother, so nothing can happen to him. Simple logic. If only Tresmolinos hadn't gotten slack over the years and stopped doing his homework, he might have some vague idea of the state of things."

Yeah, that bastard doesn't have the first clue of the state of things! He needs the boot!

"Now, let me ask you, my friend. How would someone act if they didn't just have their own wellbeing in mind but also that of our wonderfully benevolent organization?"

Uh…

"I'll tell you," Marshall whispered. "This certain someone would hand the car over to Confesión. He'd show her to use the GPS and the autopilot. Then he'd let her drive away with little Jesús in the passenger's seat."

García nodded, eager to please. Equally, he wondered how he would explain this arbitrary act to his comandante.

"We know when Ruben Tresmolinos will be getting here."

The Coyote glanced at the time display on the monitor. *In about fifteen minutes.* Damn, that had been a close call.

"You can enter a route that'll minimize the risk of them meeting along the way." Marshall felt the sweat on his brow. He was on thin ice here; his ability to think on his feet was getting a painfully intense workout.

That should work, thought the man. *The plateau's big enough for them to never meet.*

"That's how it's going to be. And don't even think about reaching for one of your knives! I'll step back now, but don't forget I still have you in my sights. Don't look right or left unless you *really* want to see my face."

No! Anything but that!

"You'll shove those two into the car, instruct them as we've just discussed, and send them on their way. It's a quiet night out there. In a few hours they'll be in…Albuquerque." Now Marshall at least had a rough idea of where he was. "When they arrive, our people will take them under their wing without drawing too much

attention. But that won't be your concern anymore. Your job is to tell Tresmolinos that he's right on the verge of being shot down. Man, he'd have royally screwed this up! Either Ruben changes his attitude pronto, or we may have to conclude our business arrangement with him. One last chance."

Jack García pondered whether he might as well clean the slate himself. He had three throwing knives, and the comandante didn't usually bring more than two lackeys with him...

"I won't be far away," said Marshall. A sense of deep disgust rose in his stomach, but he had to endure it and stick to his role. "We're never far away. Don't forget that. Now get going!"

From the gap between the lockers, he watched as the coyote went into the other room, woke up the now-dozing siblings, and told them what was happening. There was nothing more John Marshall could do for Confesión and Jesús except to silently wish them luck with the rest of their lives.

Hastily, he used the computer to fulfill his original goal. He typed in the phone number on Homer G. Adams's business card. To his astonishment, he heard the familiar British voice after just two rings.

"Yes, Mr. Marshall?"

"How did you know it was me?"

"I have many business cards. Some are one of a kind with single-purpose telephone numbers on them. How can I help you?"

"I have to make this brief and then get away from here as soon as I can. Sid González, one of my foster children—"

"The teleporter. Currently the undisputed number one most wanted person in the country. What about him?"

"He wants to take us over the border to Mexico. To Narco Country. To a place that Sid called 'Camp Specter.' To face up to his archenemy, a man called Clifford. I don't know his surname. You offered me your help."

“I’ll be there.”

How quickly the tables had turned! Now it was Marshall’s turn to feel like a puppet again, manipulated from the shadows in what felt to him like a surreal, baffling play.

“Mr. Adams, I know next to nothing about you. Can you at least give me *some* idea of your intentions?”

“With the way things stand right now, that would be premature, unwise, and dangerous. Besides, I’m afraid I’m also under some significant time pressure.”

“One last question, then. Why are you doing this?”

“For the same reasons as you, John. Because it has to be done. Goodbye.”

“Wait!”

Click. The audio connection was cut off and couldn’t be reestablished. Marshall’s pent-up tension erupted into anger at being palmed off so callously. He slammed his fists against the keyboard so hard that a few keys flew up and past his ears. Meanwhile, the sounds of the off-road vehicle faded into the distance.

John Marshall left via the side exit, emerging into the pale, bluish moonlight. Moderately satisfied, he climbed down and started making his way back.

11.

Party at Kevin's

July 2, 2036

As per Crest's exhortations, Eric Manoli had experimented with the Arkonide battledress's capabilities during the flight. Among other things, he'd figured out that the Postronik could use its high-performance com transceiver to link into the global network without it being traced back to him. That was very handy indeed.

He still couldn't get in contact with Rhodan, however. The Chinese jamming stations and firewalls saw to that. Far more primitive technology, but still impossible to break through given the concentrated distribution.

The insights he'd gained in his research had led him to choose Bengaluru, or Bangalore, as India's third largest city used to be called. It was situated in a relatively temperate area of the subcontinent, around nine hundred meters above sea level on the Deccan Plateau. Despite the tropical latitude of 13 degrees north, it had a comfortable climate with relatively mild temperatures. Even at the height of summer, temperatures hovered around a little over thirty degrees celsius during the day and rarely sank below twenty at night. This was also a dry heat, unlike in the humid coastal regions.

"You still have to be prepared for heavy rainfall at this time of year, though," Manoli informed his extraterrestrial patient.

They had landed in the expansive grounds of an electrical substation on the periphery of the metropolis. It was early evening; dusk fell rapidly here, as it did everywhere in the tropics.

"Scholars still argue about the origins of the city's name. Personally, I like the version where in the tenth century of our date notation, the king got lost in the woods, and an old woman helped him by serving him boiled beans. In his gratitude, he's said to have

named the place ‘Benda Kaluru,’ meaning ‘town of boiled beans.’”

“A lovely story,” said Crest languidly. “As a historian, I recognize parallels to countless other origin myths. I would even venture to suggest that it’s most definitely a fabrication. To me, this seems to be a cosmic constant: what prevails is not the objectively truthful version of history but the better, more attractive version.”

“History is written by the victors. That’s what people here say. But I’m sure your society is much further along than ours in that regard.”

“Much more.” Crest da Zoltral coughed. “We’ve been victorious for so long that we can’t even learn anything from the defeats anymore. Our archives are filled almost exclusively with whitewashed files. That pushed me to dig deeper and deeper. Then I hit upon a trail. One leading to planet…” He faltered.

“Earth? Terra?”

“No. But that trace begins here, in this star region. It’s been here since time immemorial; that much is certain. With that argument, I was able to convince Thora to bring the *Aetron* here.”

“You’re looking for something? For what?”

“Healing,” the Arkonide answered, wheezing. “A cure for the ailments of age.”

“You’re hoping to find the fountain of youth? As your doctor, in accordance with the oath I’ve sworn, I must give you the plain truth: your days are numbered, Crest, as much as I regret to say it. I’ll do everything in my power to prolong your life, but we’re talking about months here, maybe years. Definitely not decades. Human medicine can synthesize erythropoietin in many different forms, and in that sense we should have the means to alleviate your condition pretty quickly. Whether your leukemia can be fully cured in the long term is a different kettle of fish. But that’s a problem for later. The most urgent thing is dealing with the infection you’ve picked up, which is on the verge of turning into pneumonia. To that end, I’m going to rent out a small, private clinic, which is an

entirely common practice here."

Bengaluru, which had discarded the anglicized name of Bangalore two decades earlier, was one of the most important centers of medical treatment on the planet, specializing in the discreet treatment of wealthy foreigners.

"I've already contacted a suitable institute, presenting myself as a millionaire's private doctor and subtly implying that my client was infected with an AIDS offshoot. That's an immune disease."

"I know of this epidemic from the com transmissions I analyzed on board the *Aetron*."

"I see. By necessity, our doctors and scientists have made significant progress with AIDS treatment in the last few decades, but since it's transmitted mainly through sexual contact, it's still treated as a delicate subject. That's our basis for wanting the greatest possible discretion. The institute understood our need to remain incognito."

"Bravo! You've arranged everything very cleverly." Once again, fatigue and a general weakness threatened to get the better of the Arkonide. "Are we on a direct course for this hospital? To be honest, I'm quite looking forward to being able to lie down on a bed."

"You'll have to hold out for another hour or two, I'm afraid. We have a certain cash flow problem. You see, when one wants to anonymously make use of a facility like this, with no proof of legitimacy whatsoever, it involves sliding some cash across the table. Everything is all set up in advance, and someone will be waiting for us at 2200 hours in the clinic—but we'll need to pay a substantial sum on arrival. That's money I don't have. Withdrawing money from an ATM or a bank doesn't strike me as a realistic option either. Firstly, I doubt they'd just hand over that much money. Secondly, the US government presumably disabled all our accounts when we deserted. Thirdly, for that reason, any attempt to access our accounts is sure to set off alarm bells at every secret service bureau there is. Our flight from the dome would be discovered and our location laid bare, in turn making Rhodan's

negotiating position significantly weaker."

"But you have a plan for how to get the money without drawing too much attention. You don't mean to commit a bank robbery, do you?"

"No. I'll sell something. Something very close to my heart—literally." Manoli clapped on the breastplate of his Arkonide suit.

"Doesn't a transaction like that bring its own risk of discovery?"

"Fortunately," replied the doctor with a melancholy chuckle, "practically every big city on the planet has a place where no one would recognize an alien standing right next to them."

Of all the cities in India, Bengaluru had grown the most dramatically over the past few decades. The population was now over six million. Of those, more than half were immigrants from every corner of the globe, mostly qualified professionals in the booming scientific and research branches of information technology, biology, medicine, and genetics, but also civil fields like the military aerospace industry. That was why, almost ninety years after the end of British colonial rule, English had established itself as a second official language alongside Kannada, the primary language of the state of Karnataka.

The cosmopolitan flair so proudly extolled by the tourist information office's websites wasn't especially evident in this outlying suburb. Plain, functional architecture was everywhere. The electrical substation was surrounded by countless industrial facilities and factory complexes, large and small. The list of well-known international concerns with subsidiaries here was a long one: Intel, Siemens, Biocon, IBM, Sartorius, Hindustan Aeronautics...

Proceeding towards the center, they came upon one of the sprawling parklands that had earned Bengaluru the reputation of being a garden city. Bordering this were neighborhoods with neat, well-maintained apartment buildings—dwellings for the sizable middle class of well-paid managers, scientists, and technicians.

Manoli's destination was at the edge of the shopping mall that made up the district's social hub. The navigation system smoothly guided him and Crest through dark, unpopulated alleys and backstreets. The battledresses' camouflage function helped as well, letting them reach a side entrance to the shopping center unnoticed. Then, however, it was time to disable the chameleon effect.

"Are you certain that it's safe to show ourselves?" Crest asked.

"Absolutely!" Manoli called up the webcam from the inside of the store again for one last look. "I doubt we'll attract much notice. Just follow my lead. Don't say too much, but if you're pressed to, stick to the truth. I'm confident that no one will believe a word of it."

He pushed open the door to the comic book shop. Above it hung a hand-painted sign that proudly proclaimed, "ALIEN PARTY TONIGHT!!!"

Inside, a slight figure wearing a green rubber mask with a protruding snout broke away from a group of similarly costumed people. "Hi! I'm Kevin, and I own the place. I sleep here too, so if you have to barf, go out into the alley, okay? Apart from that, make yourselves at home! And listen, don't take this the wrong way, but I wouldn't be too optimistic about your chances of winning the costume prize. Arkonide spacemen are really trending right now; we already have six or seven, and with all due respect, most of them are way more believable than you guys."

As he spoke, he turned a reproachful gaze on Manoli, who replied apologetically, "I was thinking of finishing off my outfit here. You stock white wigs and makeup, right?"

"A huge selection! Look on the left side at the back; Kunal will be glad to help you out. Now, feel free to mingle, have fun, and if you have any questions about our abundant selection of literary treasures, I'm your man."

"Actually, I wanted to..." Manoli began.

But Kevin and his snout had already bolted over to a table

covered in display shelves that were packed tightly with comic books.

“Hands off!” he shouted at a Klingon about to remove an issue from its plastic sleeve. “Don’t you dare, Hong! You know the rules. For books in AA condition, first you pay, then you look.”

“Fascinating,” said Crest, as Manoli ushered him on.

“Goddamn, I am *begging* you!” A tall, lanky man of indeterminate age, wearing a red T-shirt with a yellow lightning bolt symbol, spun towards them and looked Crest up and down contemptuously. “If you *have* to embarrass yourself with amateur hour makeup and a cheap, clunky-looking excuse for a space suit, you could at least stay in character and not start quoting the great Spock. It’s not even your franchise!”

Stunned, the Arkonide opened his mouth and then closed it again. The critic with the Texan accent didn’t wait for an answer; he turned right back to his previous conversation partners.

“Now, I’d like to reiterate my well-founded demand for Brian to be expelled on the grounds of extreme off-topicness. I repeat: Superman is obviously an alien, since he comes from Krypton. Batman, on the other hand, is not. Everyone knows he was born as Bruce Wayne in Gotham City.”

The man in the Batman costume defended himself. “But they’re friends. Colleagues.”

“Brian. In conventional terms, Simon and I are colleagues, since we work at the same institute. However, I have two doctorates and practice theoretical physics, while Simon is a mere engineer—i.e. basically a glorified mechanic. He cobbles together toilets designed to operate in the microgravity of the International Space Station. He more or less works as a plumber while I uncover the secrets of the universe.”

“Ha!” cried the rather stocky Superman. “Speaking of off-topic, the Flash is no more an alien than Batman is. Barry Allen, an ordinary police chemist, gained his superhuman ability due to a lab

accident."

"I return your 'Ha!' and supplement it with one further 'Ha!' Allen was the *second* Flash, introduced in October 1956. The original and one true Flash, Jay Garrick, comes from a parallel Earth. Ergo, he is of extraterrestrial origin. To give just one example of how Allen, the pathetic knock-off, betrays the honor of the real Flash: in all his many races against Superman, he's never achieved anything better than a draw. Highly implausible given that he could supposedly reach the speed of light and should thus be able to run invisibly over air molecules."

"He and Superman were friends," insisted the man dressed as Batman, who didn't seem to be the brightest. "And colleagues. In the Justice League."

The spindly man in the T-shirt wrung his hands. "Heavens, Brian, how many times? The *third* Flash, Wally West, is justifiably treated as a non-entity by true experts like me. Sure, he won against Superman, but only by *exceeding* the speed of light. As everyone knows, this is completely impossible unless he's somehow hiding a warp drive under that tight uniform. Besides, that's not his franchise! Above all else, neither Superman nor Batman were founding members of the original, one and only *true* Justice League. Specifically, it consisted of the Flash, the Martian Manhunter, Aquaman, Green Lantern, and Wonder Woman. Not that I've ever understood what they needed the woman for. A lot of the time she just got tied up in artificially provocative poses."

"And teenage me certainly knew it," said Superman, smacking his lips lasciviously. "Apparently, the creator of Wonder Woman, the psychologist William Moulton Marston, is a major figure in the bondage scene."

"Wonder Woman has to be counted as a borderline case along with Thor. They're both of divine origin. But does Asgard count as an alien realm? Strictly speaking, no, just like Olympus doesn't. Green Lantern, on the other hand, is an earthling by definition, assuming you don't count the ridiculous alien DNA that the *second-and-a-half* ring bearer was temporarily affected by." This earned him a punishing glare from a man standing at the counter in a

Green Lantern costume. “But then, my former roommate never did place much value on accurately upholding contractual terms.”

“I’m utterly perplexed,” whispered Crest da Zoltral. “What are they talking about?”

“Comic books. Graphic novels, they’re also called. I’ll admit I’m also a fan of this perennially popular art form, just like other forms of speculative fiction. You could also call it escapism. I think that’s something me and most people in the room are very conscious of. It might come from a need that even intelligent and educated people have to switch off for a few hours and leave reality at the door. Ultimately, certain technological achievements play a role in this as well. As seen in...”

“Almost the entire crew of the *Aetron*, yes. I ardently hope that humanity doesn’t go down the same terrible path. Perry Rhodan will have to keep an eye on that.” He paused. “Eric, I don’t feel well. Please try to bring our business here to a quick conclusion.”

“As quick as possible. I just have to find a buyer.”

Because Kevin was nowhere to be seen right now, Manoli guided his patient through the crowd, ignoring the disparaging remarks from other “Arkonides.” As they walked, he noticed that the majority of the costumed people wore thick, horn-rimmed glasses under their varied masks, had pear-shaped figures, and were male.

He headed towards the only woman he could see in the entire throng. Currently scuttling in the direction of the counter, she was blonde, around fifty, and not in costume. All she had was a sticker on the collar of her blouse reading *Power Girl*.

Before Manoli could speak to her, Green Lantern put himself in the way, sought out his hand, and shook it. “Professor Douglas Saltzberg, California Institute of Technology,” he announced. “This is my wife, Kaley. We’re just visiting and staying with an Indian friend. So many memories, so much nostalgia. To be honest, everything’s exactly like old times. Dr. Parsons is still getting on everyone’s nerves, same as ever. And you two?”

“Just passing through,” Manoli replied. “We saw the invite online and it sounded promising. Being diehard sci-fi fans runs in my family. It goes back as far as my great-grandfather.”

“Terrible how the scene’s going down the toilet, right? You only ever see the same old people talking the same old crap.” The short, potbellied man winked conspiratorially; he looked pretty silly in his green unitard decorated with a stylized lantern emblem. “I like your space suit, by the way. Some of the details are really neat in their execution, even if the overall ensemble looks a little cumbersome. I get the thought behind it, though. Realistically speaking, there’d have to be space for an anti-grav unit. Your allusion to that came off perfectly. You’ve also done a great job making yourself look like one of the members of the *Stardust* crew. What was his name again? Something Italian, I think.”

“Manoli.”

“That’s it! And your buddy’s not doing too bad a job of being the Arkonide either, even if he’s gone overboard with the age makeup. Pretty cool that aliens have actually found us, though, right? It’s history in the making, and we’re living through it! Even if most of the population is still in denial. It’s proven fact, but they want to block it out because it throws their little lives into disarray. Ha ha, most of them wouldn’t recognize an alien if they were staring right at one. Understandable, in a way. You know, we have a comic book store in Pasadena that could be a carbon copy of this one. Not only does it look the same, but most of the regulars are so similar they could be long-lost twins. Which they are in spirit, of course. Sorry, what was your name again?”

“Crest da Zoltral,” said Crest da Zoltral, visibly distressed.

“Commitment to the end! I like it. Since you’ve dedicated yourself so fully, would you mind giving me an autograph? In ‘Arkonide’ writing. Just some fantasy scribbles or whatever, ha ha. Kaley, dear, would you mind handing me the almanac?” He winked again. “Just so you know, I’m an obsessive collector. I can’t pass up any chance to get a special memento.”

The buxom blonde rolled her eyes, then brought out a thick

book. Crest looked at Manoli, half questioning and half pleading. When Manoli nodded, Crest followed the request, taking the pen offered to him and signing on a new page.

"Great! Really awesome, in fact!" The scientist in the Green Lantern costume was effusive with his praise. "And you didn't hesitate for a second! I can tell you practiced it in advance. I really appreciate it when people care about the details." He clapped Crest on the shoulder with such impressed enthusiasm that the sick Arkonide had to struggle to maintain his balance despite the suit's stabilization capabilities. It was time to rescue him.

"You described yourself as a collector," said Manoli. "That works out well. Just between you and me, I'm actually here for another reason too. I want to sell something. Circumstances have forced my hand. Do you know the magazine *Analog, Science Fiction and Facts*?"

"Is the pope Catholic? We have the complete set at home along with *Asimov's*, *F & SF*, *Galaxy*, and the occasionally very respectable British publication *New Worlds*..."

"Sad but true," Saltzberg's wife interjected dryly. "And those are by no means the only things gathering dust on our shelves."

"*Amazing* too, of course," the professor continued, unruffled. "But only starting from 1940. The early issues are impossible to get your hands on; no one gives up a crown jewel like that anymore. The same goes for *Astounding*, the precursor to *Analog*, but I'm sure I'm not telling you anything you don't already know."

Manoli opened the clutch at his collar. He pulled his lucky charm out of the inside pocket. It was a strongly yellowed magazine covered in a transparent protective sleeve. This magazine had been through a lot, most recently a journey to the moon and back.

"What would you pay for this?"

Saltzberg reached out and took it. His eyes widened, and he came very close to dropping it. He staggered backwards and leaned against the counter to keep himself steady.

“This... It... You can’t be serious,” he stammered. “This isn’t real, is it? It... It can’t be real. But it’s a damn good forgery. It *has* to be a forgery. No one in their right mind would willingly part with an original copy of the first ever issue of *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*!”

“It brings me no pleasure to part with it, believe me,” said Manoli truthfully. “Especially since it’s a family heirloom. My great-grandfather bought it in January 1930 after saving up his allowance. But like I said, my financial situation has forced my hand. I hope you won’t take advantage of my honesty about that.”

“Are you crazy? I’ll pay any price for this. Any price!”

“No, he won’t,” interrupted Mrs. Salzburg resolutely. “Not until every expert here—i.e. just about everyone here other than me and Brian—has confirmed it’s genuine. No offense, gentlemen, but I think if you’re pretending to be an astronaut and an alien, you’ve earned a certain degree of suspicion. Fake spacefarers but a real collector’s item?” As soon as she finished her last sentence, a glimmer flashed in her eyes—the light of realization.

Manoli knew immediately that he and Crest were rumbled. “Please, be merciful,” he quietly begged. “This is a serious matter for me, and I don’t intend to deceive anyone. My patie—my friend and I need the money. Your understanding would mean so much.”

The professor caught no wind of this; he had already rushed over to his group of friends to excitedly show them the sensational discovery. The news spread through the store like wildfire. In the blink of an eye, more costumed partygoers had gathered. A dense crowd formed with rapturous cries emanating from it; sharp rebukes came from Batman, who didn’t understand why everyone had suddenly lost their minds.

“Overgrown children,” remarked Kaley Saltzberg, shaking her head. To Manoli, she said, “Don’t you worry, Doctor. I won’t give you two away. Actually, your companion has already given us something absolutely priceless.” She tapped on the almanac Crest had signed. “Parsons, my husband’s old friend and rival, will be paralyzed with shock for three days when he finds out that

autograph is real. You can rest assured that his dramatic reaction will be recorded for posterity." A mischievously self-satisfied smile spread across her lips. "You don't know how much joy you've given me! To thank you, I'll do everything in my power to get you the highest possible price for your heirloom. As speedily as possible too. Your Arkonide friend looks like he's barely holding it together."

"Clever woman," said Crest afterwards. "I'd briefly doubted the maturity of the human race, but that refreshingly grounded individual taught me better. Nonetheless, if you'll allow the observation: you are a strange people."

"You can say that again. But wait until we get to the treatment room, if you don't mind."

From the moment Kaley Saltzberg had taken command, the sale of the very first *Astounding* issue had gone without a hitch. Manoli had earned more than he'd hoped for, namely everything Kevin could scrape together in cash from the register and the safe to lend to the professor. After additionally stocking up on makeup, wigs, and other paraphernalia, they had sneaked out of the party, wholly unnoticed by the euphoric collectors, ready to head for the private clinic.

In the deserted parking lot of a hardware store, they disguised themselves. Manoli painted Crest's hair a reddish brown, gave him a tanned complexion, and drew makeshift beards on both Crest and himself.

"These disguises wouldn't stand up to genuine scrutiny," he explained as he worked, "but the advance agreement with the clinic includes a guarantee that they'll disable all applicable cameras and facial recognition programs. They want to keep getting business from celebrities who want all this to stay out of the public eye. We can trust them to keep their word."

They took off the space suits and stowed them in transport crates, then put on the clothes they'd purchased from Kevin. They were then brought to the Ananthamurthy Institute in a complimentary cargo taxi.

The very dark-skinned Indian man awaiting them was wearing a well-tailored, charcoal gray suit and a beige tie. He didn't bat an eye as they went through the formalities.

"The facility is yours," he finally said. "Exclusively. You will be undisturbed for twenty-four hours, as agreed. If you'd like to extend that, please give us at least three hours' notice. I wish you every success with your treatment."

He bowed, walked gracefully towards the exit, climbed onto his bicycle, and disappeared into the sea of city lights.

Crest had fallen asleep in a wheelchair. Manoli rolled the old Arkonide into the treatment room, then began by injecting himself with a stimulant. It was going to be a long night.

12.

Hand Grenades

July 2, 2036

The timing was perfect.

John Marshall reached their camp before daybreak. After he crawled into his sleeping bag, mere minutes passed before Sid González appeared out of dazzling thin air and shook him to wake him up. The boy was so preoccupied with his impending confrontation that he didn't notice how dog-tired Marshall was and didn't ask any questions.

At some point, after an indefinable number of teleports that he only perceived at the very edge of his consciousness, he found himself in a bed again, his sweat-drenched body clinging to the sheets. The air was intensely humid. Above him spun the creaking rotor blades of a fan, but it provided no cooling comfort at all; the room remained stifling. A gecko scurried in a zigzagging path across the whitewashed ceiling, emitting shrill mating cries.

"Where... What happened?" croaked Marshall. His hurried march back had taken a toll on his limbs. His muscles ached all over; based on prior experience, it would only feel worse on the second day.

"We're in Mexico," Sue replied. Her hand rested on Marshall's neck. Soothing relief spread from it—five times over, since it came from every finger, but it was still not enough. "Over the border. In a one-horse town called San Something-or-other. The hotel's closed today."

Almost reflexively by now, Marshall focused his inner ear, or whatever he was supposed to call the new sense he'd recently acquired. There was no one in the immediate vicinity. A little farther away, there was laughter, chitchat, and haggling. A market, no doubt. It was all pretty hazy, with no powerful emotions present.

“Sid?”

“Dropped us off and fled, same as always. He looked almost as worn out as you do. I assume he’s hidden himself away somewhere to recover, maybe even in the same building. I poked around in the hallway a little, but I didn’t want to leave you alone too long. You shouldn’t have pushed yourself so hard, John. Did your trip end in success, at least?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it did.” He gathered up his memories like grainy, faded, black-and-white scenes from a long-forgotten dream. “I prevented a serious crime and helped two young people out. I hope. And I got in touch with Adams. Even if I’m just as clueless about his intentions as ever. Calling him could turn out to be a mistake.”

“It could? How?”

He sat up. “Honestly, Sue, I don’t know. It’s all going way too fast for me. Our forebears had decades to get used to the changes that came with the invention of the printing press, the railroad, the automobile, and the airplane. But teleportation is a whole new ball game. My body’s been brought here, but my spirit’s not coming, or it’s lagging behind. I’m actually still in Houston, in the shelter, and the shots only just started ringing out. Everything since then is barely comprehensible, like a fragmented nightmare. Do you know what I mean?”

“For sure. It’s not that different for me. Sid’s dragged us into his maelstrom. At least now he knows where he wants to go.”

“He wants to confront his tormentor.” Marshall noticed that he no longer categorized this mysterious stranger as an invention of Sid’s paranoia but rather took for granted that he really existed. A phantom was given form once you knew he had a name, and that name was Clifford. Admittedly, that was *all* he knew.

“Are we in Narco County?”

“Presumably. I haven’t had a chance to figure out who’s in charge here yet. It doesn’t seem that important anyway. In practice, it doesn’t matter who makes the laws, a governor or a drug boss.

People's everyday lives don't really change."

Sue. Always has her feet firmly on the ground. Marshall heaved himself out of the bed. He found his damp, mud-covered jeans and slid them on, screwing up his nose. *My kingdom for a hot bath and a change of clothes.*

A flurry of sparks solidified into Sid.

Sid "Spark" González. Marshall remembered what he'd been like when they'd first met. An adolescent, just turned sixteen, but young for his age in both appearance and temperament. Vulnerable, as he'd unmistakably been hurt many times in the past. Insecure, plagued by inferiority complexes, and barely capable of social contact. All this had led him to escape into the world of his imagination and put on a thick layer of baby fat, no doubt as a kind of armor.

That's who Sid had been when John Marshall had taken him into the Pain Shelter and tried to look after him—without neglecting the other children he'd picked up off the street, who were sometimes in far worse condition. The boy had hunkered down in his room and built model space craft. He had two left hands and bow legs that always stumbled over obstacles. That was Sid: chubby, clumsy, buried in crazy dreams, and harmless.

People change, thought Marshall. *Slowly, subtly, over the course of years. They discard a few quirks and take on new ones. Sometimes when they get to a crossroads, they even manage to take the correct turn.*

But not like this. Not in the space of a few days, and not so dramatically.

The new Sid didn't have a single gram of excess fat on his body. There was nothing left to be drained from him. The skin of his face was stretched like a mummy's wrappings across his skull, across the facial features that were familiar yet disfigured by deprivation. His eyes, nose, and teeth stood out grotesquely.

She walked to him and touched her arm stump to his neck, visibly pumping life energy into him. He let it happen, allowing

some of the tension to drain from him as well, albeit only a little. A red glow flashed across his pale cheeks.

"God," said Sue bitterly. "I can't compensate for what you're doing to yourself anymore. Come on. You need to take a break!"

Shaking his head, Sid panted, "I can't. *He's* still lurking. He's always hunting me." A pause. "Are you my friends or not?"

Marshall felt his insides knotting together. The boy wasn't a boy anymore. He was no longer a child. He looked more like an adult, almost worldly wise. Like someone facing death head-on. He could read nothing from Sid except fear. And fire, burning hot fire, that could erupt into an explosion of sparks at any moment.

"Are you on my side or not?" he repeated.

"We're with you, Spark," said Marshall. "We always have been, since the day we met you. Sue and I are your friends. We want to help you. But you don't exactly make it easy."

"I... I... I...can't do anything about that, John. He...he wanted to turn me into a monster!"

"This Clifford guy?" Marshall tried to telepathically discover the man's surname or any other clues. But the trick that had worked so well with Jack the coyote offered him nothing. Sid's thoughts raced around in circles so rapidly that there was nothing concrete to grab onto. Evidently, there wasn't just a lower limit but an upper one, too: too little emotion or far too much.

The world, the elusive reality of this sweltering hotel room somewhere south of the border, spun around Marshall. Geckos in rut were blaring and plaster was peeling from the walls. Sue had two companions she wanted to console equally, but she couldn't tear herself in two. The fan screeched. Down in the marketplace someone had lost their briefcase. The thief suspected her husband of infidelity; at this very moment, he was less than five hundred meters away with another woman, who herself was feeling triumphant because she'd taught her big-mouthed friend a lesson...

John Marshall's knees gave out. He sat himself down on the bed next to the emaciated Sid, who had similarly buckled.

Sue wedged herself between them, radiating the warm, irresistible power that laid within her slender body. "Take a deep breath, both of you," she said. "We can't go on like this. What's our plan?"

"You have to get a few things for me, John," Sid began. "Urgently." Then he reeled off a long list. Hurriedly, in the truest sense of the word.

"I don't *have* to do anything," Marshall insisted. "You may have a gun, but it doesn't work on me. Because you wouldn't shoot me with it. Or would you?"

"No," Sid admitted, suddenly meek again. "Of course I wouldn't."

"Good. Let's take a few more minutes to catch our breath. Then I'll go out there—assuming we can open the front door from the inside—and buy whatever seems reasonable to me. You two will stay here. Don't forget that I can locate you, Sid. If you skulk off again and disappear from my radar, I'll turn right around and come back to Sue. Is that clear?"

Sid nodded. "But please don't forget the hand grenades."

Please don't forget the hand grandes.

John Marshall wondered what the hell kind of world he was living in.

As dazed as a sleepwalker, he walked along the hall and down the stairs. He slid the latch to the side. The door opened inwards, and Marshall stepped out onto the street. Curiously, the heat outside felt more bearable, as if it had fizzled out between the rows of buildings.

The crossing where the hotel stood was extremely busy. A wide variety of vehicles shot out from all directions, charging towards

each other and only narrowly avoiding collisions by forming knots that were untangled just as quickly in some unrecognizable system. There were cars, buses, and trucks with electrical or combustion engines, and between them, motorcycles, rickshaws, and even donkey carts. All of them honked their horns incessantly. It stank of gasoline and diesel, of dung and other waste. Mixed with the braying of donkeys and other road users was the squawking of dozens of different pieces of music from the open windows of the surrounding houses.

Hooray! thought Marshall, partly sarcastically. Although to his own astonishment, he was genuinely a little relieved. *I'm back in civilization!*

No one paid him any notice despite his unkempt appearance and the state of his clothes. He was far from the only one around who looked bedraggled and run down. Even his unsteady gait didn't stand out by any means; it wasn't yet midday, but there were plenty of drunks already lurching about.

He came to the *zócalo*, the village's central square. A multitude of scents overwhelmed him. Stalls offered flowers, vegetables, spices; unchilled cuts of meat swarming with flies; fish in half-melted piles of ice. And alcoholic beverages: beer, on its own or mixed with lime juice and tabasco to make the popular *chelada*; and naturally, both tequila and the even stronger agave liquor, mezcal.

Around the marketplace were clusters of shoeshiners, each trying to one-up the rest with palatial customer chairs, wide and colorful parasols, and comprehensive collections of newspapers. A five-man mariachi band in tattered eccentric uniforms with oversized, moth-eaten sombreros flitted from one pub garden of the surrounding bars to the next. One played a large bass guitar hanging from his shoulder and two the same dreadfully out-of-tune marimba, while two trumpets blared out over the top. Marshall knew the piece. It was called "Cielito Lindo"—"beautiful sky," or "sweetheart." The chorus was the kind that got stuck in your head so firmly that you couldn't get it out again. *Ay, ay, ay, ay, ¡canta y no llores!*

Sing, don't cry...

John Marshall wasn't really up to singing right now. Still, he'd gladly have drifted along and soaked up the atmosphere for a while. It was an unexpected pleasure to finally move freely and unchallenged among people again. Once in a while someone cast him a brief, curious glance, but their interest quickly waned. No one spared him any more than a passing thought. Plenty of people here were down on their luck, and he was just part of the crowd.

Narco County. That was the blanket name given to the Mexican border regions where the drug cartels' spheres of influence had grown into genuine microstates. Officially, they didn't exist, but in reality, drug barons ruled over their landholdings like medieval monarchs. Neither Mexico's police nor its military dared set foot in this lost territory. This resulted in a certain amount of immigration from north to south, albeit in far smaller numbers than the other way around; here, no one gave a rat's ass if you were on the wanted list in the US. Marshall had never thought he'd be so happy about that.

In the first clothing store he came across, he bought outfits for Sue, Sid, and himself. He put his on straight away. He could almost have jumped for joy in the dressing room. Fresh clothes! They didn't feel soft and luxurious or anything, but they were dirt cheap. They hardly made an impact on his supply of *dólares*, which naturally were accepted as currency here.

He and his companions had pooled their money, although Sid had easily contributed the most. Marshall tried not to think about how the boy had ended up with all those coins and bills. He had a bigger moral quandary on his hands.

After taking his bags, he adopted a hushed tone and said, "I'm looking for a weapons shop. Can you recommend one?"

The sales clerk was filing her nails, bored. She didn't bother looking up. "Two blocks from here. Go past the town hall, then right. Tell that fatso Ignacio that Adriana sent you, and he'll give you a discount. He's my cousin."

Marshall didn't read any suspicion in her thoughts. "Thanks!"

“Anytime.”

As he followed her directions, John Marshall asked himself whether his conscience could really handle giving Sid what he’d asked for. The boy didn’t just want a bulletproof vest and hand grenades but a semiautomatic assault rifle and plenty of ammo to go with it as well. Plus the ingredients to cobble together an explosive vest.

“I’d rather die,” Spark had said, deadly serious, “than fall back into his clutches. If I can take him with me, I’d be doing humanity a big favor.”

Marshall shuddered. Should he really be arming a potential suicide bomber? He was deeply dubious about whether Sid—Sid González, of all people!—could handle heavy weaponry in a responsible way.

Conscious that he was only putting off this decision, Marshall bought something to eat at a kiosk first: bread rolls filled with sausage, cheese, chili, and avocado paste that looked mouthwateringly delicious. He took a hearty bite.

Despite his incredible new cognitive ability, John Marshall was still only human.

13.

Guidelines and Ideals

July 2, 2036

Bai Jun was sitting in his temperate command tent and mulling over the piece of fabric he held between his fingers. It was a miniature-sized American flag, a uniform emblem that had been ripped off and thrown indifferently to the ground.

That spot, a hillcrest that looked out across the Gobi, was where General Bai Jun had arranged for his headquarters to be built shortly afterwards. Not by coincidence, of course, but *because* of that. In any campaign, half the battle came down to putting yourself in your enemy's shoes and understanding their motivations, their history, and their personal idiosyncrasies. Strategy and tactics came later. Those were skills you had to master to avoid making any stupid mistakes. Knowledge of command structures, leadership skills, and so on—they all mattered too. But far more crucial was knowing who you were up against. What made the enemy tick. What drove him, deep in his heart. The enemy would make choices to take action, relocate his troops, launch attacks, or establish defensive positions. Any general who didn't know *why* his foe had chosen a specific course and not another had already lost.

It was, in many ways, just like being at a gaming table. You had to know when to call, raise, bluff, fold, or bet everything on a single chance without looking back. At that level, the others were all making probability calculations as well. Simple mathematics rarely tipped the scales. Indisputably, people were capable of quick and clever thought; otherwise, the human race wouldn't have come to dominate all the instinct-driven wild animals that had once seemed so indomitable and ultimately taken control of the world. But the decisive factor was having a feel for the moment.

Bai Jun let the shoulder emblem slide through his fingers. Red and blue, stars and stripes. The Americans, as they called

themselves, arrogantly ignoring the residents of the other nations of the dual continent, took great pride in their flag. Pilots, in particular, tended to be the foremost patriots. After all, their homeland let them play with expensive, high-tech toys unavailable to the public and thus gifted them with mastery of the skies. In both China and the US, a large proportion of the population honored them as demigods.

And yet Major Perry Rhodan had ripped this small but deeply meaningful shred of fabric from his shoulder and let it fall into the dust of the Gobi Desert. As a symbol of his desertion. As a symbol that he had changed direction and was leaving his past behind in exchange for a highly uncertain future. In full knowledge that he was committing a serious crime, an egregious act that would provoke only loathing and contempt from most of his fellow countrymen.

Admirable, thought Bai Jun. He felt great esteem for this Rhodan fellow, who had gone “all in” despite not having the most amazing hand. Risking it all on one card... Bai could handle that. He certainly wouldn’t let himself be drawn into a premature counterattack. At this table, he was the one with all the power, the “chip leader.” Poker chips were stacked up in front of him while Rhodan had no more left to bet.

It was a classic siege scenario, in other words. Sit it out and let him stew in his own juices. But things weren't quite that easy either. The tried-and-tested pinprick theory hadn’t brought much success so far. It would be far more effective to...

“General?” The flaps of the tent entrance were thrown aside. “Please forgive the intrusion. I’m in urgent need of your advice.”

“What’s wrong?” Bai Jun snapped indignantly, putting away the emblem.

He Jian-Dong, his adjutant, gave a sharp salute. If he felt excessively rebuked, he didn’t show it. He was used to being treated with harsh condescension by the general.

“Tensions between our soldiers and the many thousands of

people here to support Rhodan are growing."

"Does that surprise you?"

"No, of course not. It was to be expected."

"Then why are you bothering me with it? Are you not man enough to solve such a trivial problem on your own?"

The adjutant gulped. He was twenty-five years old and looked stunning, albeit in an asexual way. If he hadn't been searching for words in consternation at the moment, the man would have looked like he'd been cut out of a recruitment poster.

"I fear you might not approve of my approach."

"Indeed?" Furrowing his brow, Bai Jun observed the youngster, who he in fact loved more than he might a son of his own. That was why he treated him like a strict father, and he was convinced that He Jian-Dong appreciated this. "Based on what, exactly?"

"I would... May I report what's just occurred?"

"If there's no avoiding it. But first pour me some wine." He gestured to the empty glass.

Reluctantly, the adjutant followed the order. He Jian-Dong himself was a model soldier; he didn't drink, gamble, or involve himself with women. He also made no secret of the fact that he disapproved of his superior officer's lifestyle.

The young man still had a lot to learn.

Bai Jun had no children, or at least none whose existence he knew of and who needed his attention. For him, "family planning" referred to not burdening himself with a family.

He had joined the People's Army at seventeen to escape the lack of prospects in his Uighur home region. As early as kindergarten, it had been drummed into him that he didn't belong, and that nobody wanted him or his people. In the army, though, the discrimination

was—almost surprisingly—limited to the realms of sleeping and showering. Anyone who bent down to pick up soap had lost, but that was probably the case anywhere that testosterone-charged individuals were locked together in a tight space. In return, they respected smarts and brutality.

Over the years, Bai Jun had benefited a great deal from others' tendency to underestimate him based on his harmless-looking rural face. He had the intelligence to forge alliances in the background, and, if it really came down to it, the instincts to stab the knife in wherever it would cause the most damage.

Later, once he was firmly established in the middle ranks thanks to his outwardly unconditional loyalty to his consistently detestable instructors, Bai Jun fashioned a more original, more *individual* image. In one of the historically recurring phases where a contrarian spirit and a certain rebellious tendency were in demand, he styled himself as the mouthpiece of the faithful, dim-witted, and always put-upon foot soldiers. As their union representative, he negotiated significant improvements to their lot, such as the rice in the mess hall having at least 115 grams of spring onions included every third day. With salt, even! What a success!

When he was finally called up to the rank of general, he again changed his image radically. There was a steady supply of upstarts like him, and self-appointed representatives of the downtrodden. In contrast, he cultivated the cliche of the playboy man-about-town. He tormented his underlings if they didn't wash his feet with the best and most expensive rice wine that could only be obtained through the murkiest possible channels.

Betraying his former ideals so strongly had been hard work, but it had paid off. At the end of it, Bai Jun lay in a hammock that was well secured on all sides. He had carved out a niche he could stay in for the rest of his life. He was the oddball, the maverick, the general you called when all the standard methods had failed and you were desperate for an unconventional solution.

Only, a situation like that would never come to pass. That was the whole point! China had bought up the bulk of US debt securities. Economic potential had outflanked military potential.

This was a twisted world where manipulating a few numbers, even the position of a decimal point, could cause more damage than a hundred atom bombs. In practice, all their global competitors had come to terms with it: China was now the hegemonic power of their planet. Not even Russia could compete, let alone the weary and bleeding USA.

Right up until Perry Rhodan had showed up with an alien in tow. And established his camp in the Gobi Desert, of all places. As if all the rules had gone out the window. As if all the diplomatic and financial networks carefully woven over the decades were suddenly obsolete.

That was when the more traditional party officials had suddenly remembered they had tolerated this parasite at their bosom for just such an eventuality: Bai Jun, the general on hand for special occasions, the master of unconventional situations. He was even half Uighur, making him practically at home in the Gobi. The task he'd previously been assigned ("bring Taiwan home") had dropped to second place overnight. The long-overdue invasion of the island that had been separatist for generations could go on without him. Ideally, it would even get lost in the shuffle amid all the global excitement over the aliens. If the world stage grew more complicated, the annexation of Taiwan would be postponed a little longer.

Bai Jun was by no means pleased by this development. He'd gone from being a special advisor to a front-line commander. How unfortunate! Interesting, too, admittedly. But the saying "May you live in interesting times" was, as ever, considered a curse in China.

General Bai Jun, whose name meant "white army," raised the wine glass, took in the scent, drank a sip, celebrated the moment the liquid met his taste buds, and clicked his tongue several times. Then he said patronizingly, "Well? Tell me already."

"Certainly. I was on patrol when I became embroiled in a clash between soldiers of the People's Army and Rhodan supporters. Our side only narrowly won. The mob pushed forward, only drawing back when I gave permission for warning shots to be fired over

their heads."

"The correct way to handle it. What could I possibly have to complain about?"

"Quite a few of the aggressors had firearms at their sides as well, from revolvers to old Russian AK-47s."

"Did they make use of them?"

"No. Not in this instance. But the mere fact that they are armed should be proof enough that they're prepared to fight on behalf of Rhodan and this 'Terrania' nonsense of his!"

"What exactly do you find untoward about that, Jian-Dong?"

"Perhaps that we're not talking about an organized army but a collection of unpredictable individuals with the potential to ignore every rule of war?" The adjutant trembled with indignation; Bai Jun loved him for that. "The situation will only escalate hour by hour if we don't take action to bring it under control."

"We're slowly coming to the point." The general slurped from his wine glass again. "What would your recommendation be?"

"To be frank, during the next such incident—and there will inevitably be another—I would shoot into the crowd. You know that I'm always eager to spare innocents. Collateral damage should be avoided wherever possible. Nevertheless..." He Jian-Dong clasped his hands behind his back and began marching back and forth in a military stride, from the old-fashioned map container to the sprawling, touch-sensitive tabletop that was now used in place of sandbox models. "Guidelines of the National People's Congress, latest edition, section two, paragraph fourteen: suppression by way of selectively setting an example. In my opinion, a few dozen deaths would be a small price to pay to be rid of this horde."

"In principle, I have no objections. Have you considered, however, that the whole world is watching? Our enemies will be popping the champagne corks if they can accuse us of a Tiananmen Square-style massacre."

“But the situation calls for it! The rabble out there grows ever larger, increasingly restless and impatient. And the troublemakers can’t stay much longer without running out of resources. They were so enamored with Rhodan’s fanciful promises that they didn’t come prepared. Their water supplies are dwindling. It’s a humanitarian catastrophe in the making.”

“What do you recommend?”

“Drive them away! With weapons, if need be.”

Bai Jun nodded. “My compliments, you are as good at towing the line as ever. High command demanded the same of me.”

“Then why are you hesitating?”

“I’m not hesitating. I’m giving myself time to think. Here are my orders; listen well and obey. Ensure that the people out there are provided with everything they need. Water, food, clothing, even electronic devices for passing the time. We are China; we form the backbone of this world. We produce it all, so we can also give it away. Do you understand? Whoever comes here, no matter how misguidedly, should want for nothing. I consider you personally responsible for this.”

“But General...”

“Dismissed!”

14.

Campfire Site

July 2, 2036

John Marshall received two lots of outrage when he spread out the shopping bag's contents in front of his companions.

"You actually got them for him?" asked Sue, perplexed.

Sid, on the other hand, moaned. "Half of it's missing!"

"Listen here, you two. I kept my promise and got a hold of what was possible. Mexican law may not hold any sway in Narco County, but there are still rules. You do get that, don't you? Even around here, you can't just walk into a store and buy an assault rifle. Or plastic explosives. It wouldn't just be the feds getting notified but the drug bosses' negotiators too."

"What you did get is bad enough." Sue pointed at the Kevlar vest, the two hand grenades, and the Taser.

"What's that supposed to be, anyway?" Sid whined.

"A stun gun. It lets you take your opponent out of action instead of killing them."

"I know what it is. A toy that only works at close range. That'll get me nowhere!" The boy was practically shouting; he thrashed about in frustration.

"Seriously, Spark, how are you picturing this going down? Do you think you're a one-man army who can take out all the evil in the world in one fell swoop?"

Marshall's fleeting hope that seeing the weaponry would make Sid realize the futility of this endeavor had been shattered. The sixteen-year-old's panicked thoughts made it clear that he wouldn't be swayed from his decision. Reason had nothing to do with it

anymore.

“It’s too late,” he replied bluntly. “I have to end this one way or another.”

He carefully secured the hand grenades to his belt. Marshall debated whether he should feel guilty that they were only dummies used for practice exercises. That might mean he really was sending the boy to his death; he had no way of knowing if his betrayal would turn out to be a fatal error. All he did know was that weapons, *real* weapons, generally caused more calamity than they prevented.

If only the twins hadn’t opened fire from the shelter…

Sid put on the body armor and reluctantly equipped the Taser too. “Time for me to get going,” he said haltingly, yet composed. “Thank you both for your…concern. For trying so hard to understand me and support me. I also want to apologize for annoying you and everyone else. I didn’t mean to. I really didn’t want to hurt anyone.”

Marshall went to speak, but he had a lump in his throat, so Sue got there before him. She wrapped her hand around Sid’s shockingly thin forearm.

“Just don’t think I’m letting you go alone. We belong together. We’re friends. More than that—me and John are your family, dammit!”

It didn’t take a telepath to tell that the young girl, fragile though she was, wouldn’t willingly let go. And that Sid couldn’t bring himself to throw her off by force.

“I’m coming too,” said Marshall plainly. “The thought of leaving you both to an unknown fate would be unbearable for me. I could never look myself in a mirror again.”

The boy wavered, visibly moved. He chewed on his lower lip, then said, “You have no idea who we’re dealing with. The power he has over people. He has strong henchmen working for him too.”

“People like…us?” asked Marshall. He had picked up on something along those lines.

Sid nodded. “But they can do other things. Terrible things. And if their abilities have grown in the meantime, like ours have…” He didn’t complete the thought. Flames danced in his mind.

“All the more reason to have us by your side,” said Sue.

“I agree,” said Marshall in spite of the queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He gave Sid his hand.

The boy closed his eyes and set sparks flying.

The panorama was as idyllic as a postcard. A range of hills descended to the east and surrounded a wide valley. Rich colors shone in the light of the low afternoon sun, encompassing every possible shade of green and earth tones from dark brown to gleaming porcelain white. A handful of cotton-wool clouds drifted across the bright blue sky.

“The perfect post for a picnic,” said Sue. “Or a campfire.”

“You’re not the first one to have that idea.” Marshall pointed to a circle of soot-blackened stones the size of basketballs, in the center of which were the cindered remnants of firewood strewn with faded chicken bones and balls of screwed up aluminum foil. “Fried chicken with baked potatoes in foil. We used to make that every so often in the garden of the Pain Shelter. Do you remember?”

His young companions gave no reply.

They were standing on an outcrop that reminded him of a protruding balcony. Almost vertically below, Marshall glimpsed the square outline of a facility.

“Is that it?” he asked Sid.

“Yeah. That’s… That *was* Camp Specter.” The boy grabbed onto their arms again to teleport down.

“Wait. Save your energy. It’s better if we go on foot. There’s a path, and it looks like a pretty comfortable walk.”

“But that’ll take forty-five minutes, at least!”

Marshall listened for a moment. “No one anywhere nearby; not a single soul. We have time. Worst case, you can always jump again after all.”

Shockingly, Sid conceded. They followed the path down at a leisurely pace. A mild breeze mitigated the heat. The scenery, the beautiful sky, brought the Mexican folk song to mind again. *De la Sierra Morena, cielito lindo, vienen bajando.* He hummed the melody in time to his steps. *Ay, ay, ay, ay…*

The farther they descended, the clearer it became that the barracks, which took up the space of a football field, were now ruins. Charred ruins. A tall steel fence formed the outer barrier; at its four corners rose the black carcasses of watchtowers.

“The camp’s abandoned,” Sue stated. “Do you know why it burned down, Sid?”

The boy didn’t react, as though he hadn’t even heard the question. He was lost in his own thoughts again, mechanically putting one foot in front of the other. An inferno raged in his mind.

Once they had reached the bottom and passed through the rusted, wide-open door, Marshall asked, “What now?”

“We wait,” Sid replied, breaking his silence last. “He knows how to find me. He’ll be here soon.”

“This Clifford guy.”

“Who else?”

This time the boy connected a face to the name. But Marshall couldn’t make sense of it, because the contours were out of alignment. They were doubled, like in the 3D movies from his childhood where you had to wear red and green glasses, or like two

identical faces with completely different expressions had been laid on top of each other.

"If he can locate you over any distance," Sue interjected, "why didn't he track you down sooner, when you were at the Pain Shelter?"

Sid stared at her in disbelief, as though he hadn't taken her to be so dense. "It's called the 'Pain Shelter'! John gave us shelter from pain."

Slowly, Marshall caught on. "You mean..."

"*You* were the building, John!" exclaimed the heartrendingly gaunt teenager. "Your idealism, your warmth, the fact that you cared so much. You wanted to protect us from the evil in the world. And you did that. You did it better than you even knew. When I was near you, I didn't need to suffer. That's why I—how did you put it?"

"'Disappeared off his radar,'" Sue offered.

"Right! It still works, by the way. When I'm with you, he won't get me. Or if I'm asleep, or if I change my location quickly enough and often enough."

Mosaic stones formed into an image. In the shelter, Sid was idle, sometimes to the point of lethargy. A living couch potato. Outside, he was frantic, antsy, always on the run...

Only one detail didn't fit. "But I'm with you now," said Marshall.

Sid wheezed. "Here," he said bitterly, "the memory is a thousand times stronger than you. You can't shield me here, John. Not here in Camp Spec..." His voice died, suffocated by tears.

They took up position in the shadows between the burnt ruins, choosing a location that provided a good view of the two opposing access roads and the helicopter landing pad.

The hours passed without much conversation. Sue alternately

massaged their backs, loosening cramps and granting both pleasant warmth and refreshing coolness all at once. Birds circled above them. Outside on the plain, the wind blew tumbleweeds past them, as if trying to perfectly embody the cliche of a Western movie with the final duel about to begin. Marshall almost thought he could hear a lone harmonica.

And then...

He had dozed off, which was hardly surprising given his sleep deficit. “Huh? What’s happening?”

Sue had woken him gently but remorselessly. “Sorry, John. It’s starting. Someone’s coming.”

Behind the boulders that the street coiled around at the entrance to the northwestern valley, a mighty dust cloud had swirled up and was expanding. Marshall lost his bearings. He felt mental impulses, not only from this direction but also two others. They were all moving rapidly, which made it almost impossible for him to grasp them and tell them apart. In front, behind, far above...too much all at once. He sensed worry, vigilance, helpfulness, but also deception, cold calculation, greed—and a firm resolve that instilled fear in him.

A matte-black minivan broke through the dust cloud it was dragging behind it and hurtled along the tarmac, swerving around the corners en route to the camp. Braking with a screech, it came to a stop inside the square strewn with the charred remnants of various pieces of instruments.

The windows were tinted. The passenger door swung open and someone got out. A hunched figure in a threadbare tailored suit.

“That’s Adams,” said Marshall. He stood, a huge weight lifting from his soul. “Everything’ll be fine now. He’ll take us to safety.”

“No!” Sid hissed. “Clifford can mask himself! He has Yvette on his team, and she can convince you he has a different appearance! But he’s not fooling me.”

The boy dashed off, the police gun in one hand, the Taser in the other. He jumped from rooftop to rooftop, sometimes with physical strength, sometimes by teleporting. He appeared here, there, and everywhere until he found a spot that gave him a clear shot. Sid took aim...

A high-pitched shot, an almost laughable squeak, rang out in the distance. Sid grasped at his throat, which now had a finger-length bolt stuck in it. He collapsed, instantly unconscious.

"Mr. Marshall?" Adams called out, raising his hat. "I know you're there. Come out from where you're hiding and get on, please. Quickly! A helicopter's approaching. We only have a few minutes on them."

"Do you trust him?" Sue breathed.

Inside, the minivan was disconcertingly spacious despite the high-tech equipment crammed into every free corner. The reclining seat adjusted itself to fit Marshall's back, which he found quite alarming.

"I still don't know if I should thank you yet," he puffed, clinging to the handhold to avoid being pressed against the car's inside wall even further. The vehicle was turning and accelerating at a breakneck pace.

"Save your breath. Explanations will follow, but not right now. Can you sense the enemy?"

Marshall reached out into the ether. The man with two faces was raging. He'd thought his prey was as good as his, but it had slipped through his fingers. Before the man could latch onto the mental feelers, Marshall cut the connection by raising a barrier. A shield, a refuge from pain.

A shelter.

You were the building, Sid had said. Marshall still didn't understand how he caused this effect. But it worked.

The driver braked suddenly. The side door slid back. A very short man, practically a dwarf, heaved himself onto the seat next to Sue. “Everything hunky-dory?”

“Not yet,” said Adams coolly without turning his head as the van drove off again. Columns of numbers rattled across a narrow, firmly demarcated segment on the right-hand side of the windshield. “But it looks like our combined forces will allow us to irritate the pursuer enough to elude him. Mr. Marshall, allow me to introduce you to Allan D. Mercant, the world’s craftiest secret agent.”

“The honor is all mine,” said the gnomish man. He was old, at least sixty, if not seventy based on his posture. Only a sparse, snow-white ring of hair surrounded his bald head. On the other hand, his face held a youthful tautness that didn’t resemble the artificial stiffness of a surgical facelift. “It’s a pleasure. It’s great that we’re finally meeting.” His thoughts lay hidden behind an impenetrable veil of secrecy crafted over decades.

“What’s going on here?” Marshall demanded. He deeply despised being a ball in a game played by unknown manipulators.

“Calm down, John,” said Sue. “It’s all right. Relax. The good guys are teaming up.”

Less than five minutes later, a helicopter, a Sikorsky HH-60 Jayhawk, landed at Camp Specter.

The pilot throttled the rotors, but only enough that he could still execute an immediate take-off, and locked the controls. “We’re here.”

“Too late,” said his passenger accusingly.

“Not my problem, boss. I got every last bit of juice out of this old clunker. We snuck under the Mexican sombrero without anyone batting an eyelid. Destination reached, before the deadline, even. What else do you want?”

“He’s gone,” complained his client. “Dead, drugged, shielded,

who knows? And he was so tantalizingly close!"

"I know that feeling. You spend hours hitting on some broad, sinking mountains of cash into her stupid fruity cocktails, and she gives you a little kiss on the cheek and says buh-bye. Take it on the chin, boss. That's women, and that's life. If you want to reclaim your expenditures, I know an address for some real hot stuff you can palm off for many times the price on the other side of the border. Speaking of damage mitigation, we agreed we'd negotiate the price for the return flight separately based on the lay of the land. Well?"

"Certainly," said the man in the passenger seat, still staring straight ahead as if there were something worthwhile to discover there. He had a striking, noble profile, smooth and flawless yet equally sharp and distinguished, like the classic hero of an online computer game. Then he swiveled his head ninety degrees. The other half of his face was disfigured, his face cratered with scars. They glowed from the inside as though a crystalline surface were being lit by points of light lying under the skin.

The helicopter pilot was called Juan Fernandez Gruber. He had fought his way up out of the gutter along with his wife and two children. His daughter was pubescent right now; every day she got on his nerves more and more. But never mind; she would find her lord and master. The thought of how much money would be devoured by her fifteenth birthday party made a chill run down his back. His little son, Manolito, named after his grandfather, was quite the opposite. He was the purest sunshine, a textbook charmer who could wrap anyone around his little finger just by innocently batting his long eyelashes. He'd grow into a scoundrel, make no mistake! Juan was mischievously looking forward to locking horns with his son and heir.

"And what else," buzzed the two-faced man, "do you plan to contribute to the further development of mankind?"

"Huh?"

"Let's be honest, Gruber. No one actually needs you anymore. Please, you know as well as I do that you're past your peak. Your

life won't add up to much anymore. Your wife's bored to death of you; your job became routine long ago. The wayward brats will do what they want whether you're there or not. How many times have you told yourself you'd rather throw in the towel? Ten, twenty times, every day of the week. Tell me I'm wrong."

Juan agreed with him. Although right now, he could hardly concentrate. His vision was blurry, as if someone had suddenly bashed him over the head with a cudgel. The man beside him grew hazy, dissolving into a whirlwind of pixels. A shame, actually; the fellow had always been so nice to him.

To make up for it, the silky smooth voice was intensely clear. "In your place, I'd be very disappointed. With my relatives and acquaintances, with my embarrassing future prospects, not to mention the impossible global situation. Nothing but stress from top to bottom, right? But we know there's a way out. You can see it right there. It's the way up that hill. Release is beckoning. Your prayers have been answered. All you need to do is rise up, up to that rock ledge, stand out on the edge, and let everything fall, everything that's weighing you down, including yourself. Don't worry about me. I don't need your services anymore, and you've already seen too much, so I'd prefer to fly back alone anyway. That's all right with you, isn't it?"

Juan Fernandez Gruber gratefully followed the friendly suggestion. He crested the hill as the familiar clattering of his helicopter faded into the distance. At the top, he spread his arms like wings and threw himself off, happier than he'd ever been before.

It was a short trip, but the most wonderful flight of his suddenly abbreviated life.

15.

The Attack

July 2 and 3, 2036

The small clinic's intensive care unit was well equipped. More so, in fact, than Eric Manoli had dared to hope for. Everything was state-of-the-art, and each piece of equipment was in perfect order. He preferred not to think about who had made use of them before or for what purpose. Based on the intense smell, the staff hadn't been sparing with the disinfectant afterwards.

"Your pneumonia," he said to Crest after a successful radiological examination and blood analysis, although he wasn't sure if the Arkonide could hear him in his deathly pale, chill-stricken state, "stems from an infection of a bacterial strain on Earth that's well known and adequately well researched. So far, so good. This clinic is perfectly equipped to treat secondary pneumonias—i.e. those caused by another initial illness, as often occurs in the case of a weakened immune system. However, there is a significant complication: the pathogen has mutated in response to your Arkonide immune system. I therefore will have to modify the antibiotics accordingly, and this, of course, puts us in uncharted territory. You are the first Arkonide who has ever set foot on this planet. In your body, there are literally two worlds colliding."

Crest da Zoltral quietly wheezed away. According to the readings on the monitoring equipment, he was conscious, but whether he was following the doctor's explanation was unclear.

Manoli continued regardless. He explained that he had already begun with fluid supply via infusion and administration of mucolytic and antifebrile medications. Crest was responding remarkably well to both the acetylcysteine and the acetylsalicylic acid.

"I've prepared a mechanical ventilator, though I'd prefer not to use it unless really necessary, as it always comes with a risk of

further lung damage. But the key question is still whether we can stave off the bacterial infection."

He didn't mention that Crest's advanced age didn't exactly make it easy to select the appropriate dosage for the antibiotics. Nor was the situation ideal in regards to the four other criteria of CURB-65, the accepted system for judging the risk factors for pneumonia—namely, confusion, urea concentration, respiratory rate, and blood pressure. Manoli reviewed his therapeutic decision three times along with each individual step that had led him to it. He didn't see any errors. Even so, there were so many uncertainties that it was a balancing act, even a tightrope walk.

The drugs had never been tested in this composition before, let alone on an alien. After administering them, the doctor reflexively grasped at his chest. But his lucky charm was no longer there; he had exchanged it for one day at the clinic. Now he'd have to do without it.

There was nothing else Eric Manoli could do for the time being except think about his own health while he waited. Dealing with his own sleep deprivation, for example. He made sure that Crest's vitals weren't in critical condition and that any significant swing would instantly trigger a loud alarm. Then he stretched out on the nearest hospital bed and fell into an uneasy slumber. He was plagued by nightmares that kept waking him up with a start. There was nothing there, though; nothing but the soft hums and beeps of the instruments.

He took each of these occasions as a chance to check on his patient. Despite all this, however, he managed to get almost seven hours' sleep in all. Eventually, he couldn't stand lying in bed anymore.

Crest's overall condition had improved slightly. The antibiotics had evidently started to do their job without any worrisome side effects. With raised spirits, Manoli ate something that passed for breakfast.

Since he was unable to intervene in the healing process and was instead doomed to simply wait and see, he spent some time

browsing the global network. The flight from Terrania and its energy dome was mentioned on countless agencies' pages. However, in all cases, there was only one man mentioned: Clark Flipper, who was assumed to have defected from Perry Rhodan after his first failed break-out attempt.

"Now there are only three left," one of the commentators speculated in regards to the alleged friction between the *Stardust* crew. "The clover leaf of astronauts has been plucked, and now it's surely a matter of time until the other three and their extraterrestrial companion break under the intense psychological pressure."

Oho! They knew Rhodan and Bull very badly indeed. As for Manoli and Crest da Zoltral, there was no news whatsoever. Excellent. Nothing new regarding Flipper either. Since shaking off his pursuers, he'd as good as disappeared off the face of the Earth. Manoli hoped from the bottom of his heart that the man's search for his beloved Beth would bear fruit.

His own forced inaction started to get to him. The hours dragged on uneventfully. As happy as he was that Crest's recovery was progressing on its own, he hated sitting back and doing nothing. All the turbulence of the last few days, and now—boredom! He was genuinely having withdrawal symptoms.

He paced back and forth through the few rooms of the clinic like a wild animal in a too-small enclosure. Increasingly, a feeling nagged at him that he might have overlooked something crucial. But Crest was undeniably on the gradual road to recovery, and no further complications presented themselves.

Each time he visited at the intensive care station to check on his patient, he looked over the clinic's security systems just as fastidiously. There were cameras, microphones, and movement sensors in all exterior locations, plus a series of further sensors at the entrances and windows. All were operating normally and none of them indicated any threat whatsoever. There was no one trying to break in and nothing to report.

Despite this, his unease steadily grew. He couldn't manage to

distract himself or make light of the situation. Should he diagnose himself with early signs of paranoia, he wondered?

Late in the afternoon, on one of his aimless wanderings, he noticed a minuscule change. He was relatively sure he hadn't imagined it. That tiny light on the office computer's keyboard had never blinked before!

Manoli rushed over and pressed the relevant key. The screen lit up and text appeared: a few sentences written in both Kannada (the script illegible to him) and English. It was a warning, informing him that for the past few hours, there had been repeated hacking attempts on the clinic's network server. So far, they had all been automatically repelled. However, they were increasing in frequency and intensity, and as such, it was recommended that he get in touch with security services.

Dammit, what did that mean? Manoli tried to reassure himself that it was probably just a coincidence. The Ananthamurthy Institute was often booked by celebrities, and it was common for tabloids worldwide to try and get their hands on sensitive information via data theft. No, the hacking attack definitely didn't concern him and Crest.

Or did it? Manoli sensed movement and looked up at the ceiling, directly into the lens of a video camera that had just swiveled to face him. *Don't drive yourself insane,* he told himself. *That's just a coincidence too.*

The terms he'd agreed on with the private clinic's managers included a provision that nothing reach the outside. Naturally, the contract also required the computer system to be sectioned off. A complete physical separation from the web was impossible, however, especially as guaranteed access to external medical data banks was also a requirement in case of emergency. And where there was a connection, there was a way in.

What was Manoli to do? Calling the police was completely off the table. Trusting in the clinic's digital security measures was just as unpalatable, despite their claims that discretion was their number one priority. You could claim anything to attract a wealthy

client base.

But the option he found least bearable was remaining passive, so he tried to learn more about the nature and goals of the cyber attack. He was no IT specialist—no fanatical tinkerer like Reginald Bull. Still, his astronaut training had given him more than just a basic understanding of current computer technologies, and the internal architecture of an office computer didn't differ too much from that of NASA's systems.

"Time to see who's knocking at the back door," Manoli murmured to himself as his fingers flicked across the keys. "Or rather, who's jangling his skeleton keys—and what he's after."

When he returned to the treatment room, Crest was awake.

"You look upset, Dr. Manoli," the Arkonide observed in a clear yet quiet voice. "Is the treatment not proceeding to your satisfaction?"

"Quite the opposite. I'm happy to say that not only do you look significantly better, your readings give every reason for optimism. How do you feel?"

"Like a new man compared to yesterday. Did you manage to fight off the infection, then?"

"I'd say so, yes. The pneumonia is subsiding. Your condition is stabilizing—admittedly only to the level it was before. Your leukemia is still there, of course. That said, my examinations have confirmed my suspicion that that's also a symptom of another primary illness."

"Oh, really? Tell me more."

"Later. I'd gladly have let you rest for a while longer and used up our entire twenty-four-hour time slot, but that's no longer possible. We have to pull up stakes right away. I'm afraid someone is hard on our heels."

The Arkonide sat up with a jerk. His eyes were no longer hazy;

he had his body under control again. “How have you come to this conclusion?”

Manoli told him about the hacking attempts on the institute’s server. “It’s a highly advanced attack. I couldn’t trace it back to even an approximate point of origin. I’m pretty sure the artillery they’ve brought is in the domain of military intelligence agencies. I did manage to decipher some of the search criteria, at least. Alarmingly, they’re tailored very closely to you and me.”

“I see. So you feel we should promptly continue on our way?”

“As sad as I am to say it, I don’t see any other choice.”

“Where will we go next?”

“Africa; specifically, Ethiopia.” As he helped Crest into his space suit, Manoli explained that the world’s leading specialist in the field of virology was based there, a man named Dr. Frank M. Haggard.

“Virology? I thought I had a bacterial infection.”

“That was the secondary, or, more accurately, tertiary infection. It’s funny, when I told the clinic that you were an AIDS patient, I only meant it as a cover, but it turns out your original illness might not be too far removed from Earth’s epidemic. I’m far from an expert, but your blood has a high concentration of highly complex viruses, or retroviruses, and in some respects, their cytopathic effect is shockingly similar to that of human immunodeficiency virus. Among other things, this can in turn infect T lymphocytes and thereby trigger a T-cell leukemia. Like I said, though, I’m no expert. Haggard, on the other hand, is a tireless researcher and philanthropist who has spent a long time helping the poorest of the poor in Ethiopia at no charge, focusing on every variant of HIV. Maybe I’m going out on a limb here, but I’m firmly convinced that if there’s one person on this planet who can fully cure you, it’s him.”

“Do you think we were betrayed?” asked Crest via the com in his suit as the Indian metropolis whizzed past underneath them.

“You think one of the crazy collectors from the comic book shop might have started gossiping? Nah. Not even unwittingly. These people aren’t taken seriously outside of their own niche fields. I find it much easier to imagine there’s someone out there, a kind of spider in his web, who wants to double-check that we’re really still there under the energy dome in the Gobi Desert. That we haven’t stolen away and made for somewhere else.”

“Who could it be?”

“No idea. Someone who not only has a sharp mind and broad mental horizons but also the financial means to run a global search like that. Quite a few people and institutions spring to mind. It doesn’t surprise me that Bengaluru and the Ananthamurthy Institute were targeted in the process. Ultimately, I chose it for similar reasons.”

“Won’t that apply just as much to this Dr. Haggard in Africa and his facility?”

“Hmm. Only to a limited degree, I’m hoping. I only hit upon the idea of going to Haggard when I started considering an immunodeficiency disease as the real cause of your leukemia. Without knowing about that, why would anyone expect to find an alien from a technologically superior species in a hospital for destitute HIV patients?”

The Arkonide slowly shook his head. “How will Haggard himself greet our arrival?”

“I don’t know him on a personal level, but as he’s a great benefactor of mankind, I don’t think he’d refuse to help or turn us in to the authorities. Four years ago he won the Nobel Prize and used the money to found a hospital in Ethiopia. He’s also from Australia originally, so he has no patriotic connection to any of the three superpowers.” He paused. “Something wrong?”

Crest da Zoltral had made an odd chuckling sound. “Don’t worry, I’m doing splendidly. Please forgive me for being so amused by the word ‘benefactor.’ My people like to think of themselves as benefactors and patrons of the entire galaxy. However, some of the

populaces on the receiving end of this Arkonide benefaction do not even remotely share this perspective. Of course, I'm not at all trying to suggest that the same applies to your good Dr. Haggard."

"We'll see. By the way, we're essentially flying to the birthplace of humanity. Haggard's clinic is on the bank of the Awash River, where the oldest known hominid remains were found."

"Oh, how interesting." Crest still sounded amused. Was he making fun of Manoli's naivety, perhaps?

"Do you mean that, or are you just being polite? I can understand if you feel like you're above all my provincial sentimentality. You've visited countless worlds, I'm sure. The Earth, or Terra, is just one planet among many for you."

"Far from it. It's true that I've seen quite a bit of this galaxy, but your homeworld stands out in numerous ways. I mean that honestly. I have respect for your accomplishments. For the surprisingly advanced state of your medical science, for example."

Manoli wasn't convinced. "Over the past few decades, we haven't just had new AIDS waves to deal with but several flu pandemics as well," he explained irritably, mainly for the sake of completeness. "Our achievements may have been born of necessity."

"That may well be. How long will our journey take this time?"

"The distance from Bengaluru to Ethiopia is roughly the same as from the Gobi Desert to here. But since we'll mostly be flying over the ocean, I think our average speed will be higher."

"Excellent. I'm excited to see what awaits us beyond the great expanse of water."

16.

Lunar Day, Evening

July 3, 2036

Major Michael Freyt flew to the Moon, just as planned, and crashed, just as planned.

He and his crew had evaluations of the *Stardust*'s complete flight data up until the moment the com link to its sister ship, the *Starchild*, had been lost. This hadn't occurred purely due to entering into the Moon's shadow; the analyses of the few stray emissions intercepted by research satellites had revealed that. An unknown force had sabotaged all the onboard computers—a kind of electronic hammer that had flattened all impulses to nothing.

The same ominous effect triggered this time around as well, disrupting his own approach to the Moon exactly as calculated, down to a few seconds and a few dozen kilometers. The four occupants of the cockpit were thrown about as if a giant were shaking them by their boots.

"Here we go, boys!" cried Freyt as soon as he had air in his lungs again. "Time for the hard part. Let's show the nation that we can pull off a smoother landing than Rhodan and Bull!"

One after another, all attempts at reinitializing the computer and the four backup systems failed. Freyt had expected nothing else; this was just what had been predicted by the eggheads at NASA HQ, extrapolated from the sparse data they had on hand. The automatic steering would break down, requiring Freyt and his copilot to bring the ship down and land it manually, all from an estimated height of 360 kilometers, with an average descent speed of 1,800 meters per second.

"It won't exactly be a cakewalk," said Billy Sheldon, strained, "but Bull and Rhodan clearly managed this maneuver, so it should work for us too."

“Only better.”

“What can we do better?”

“Do you even have to ask? I bet they were only thinking about the problem right in front of their faces as usual.”

“How they could get out of this in one piece?”

“Yep. Shortsighted, as always, they burned up all their remaining fuel for the landing maneuver.”

“Those scaredy-cats!” Sheldon laughed boomingly. “Now I see where you’re going with this. We know we don’t have any to waste. We’re thinking ahead to the return journey. Economy is the name of the game!” He raised his right hand and made a victory sign with his fingers.

The gesture burned itself into Michael Freyt’s mind as a moment in his personal memory album. So confident, so all-knowing, and smiling unflinchingly—that was how he would remember the copilot, Bill Sheldon, his best friend, happiness personified.

Shortly afterwards, Sheldon lost his life in the *Starchild*’s crash landing.

By some miracle, Freyt, Deringhouse, and Nyssen were almost uninjured. They bore cuts, sprains, bruises, and a rib contusion or two. Sheldon, however, was less fortunate. A collision with a Moon rock had shattered not only the cockpit glass but also the visor of his helmet, leaving him trapped and unable to move. By the time his crewmates had shaken themselves out of their daze and rushed to help him, it was too late.

Freyt closed his crewmate’s eyes and said a prayer. Then he banished the sadness over losing a friend and the anger with fate’s cruelty. He was a soldier. The mission went on.

Ultimately, they had landed the *Starchild* close to the American base, as intended. The plan remained to take a working lunar rover from Armstrong Base; telescopes had clearly shown that at least two

of these specialized vehicles were still undamaged. They were to then make for the Arkonide starship, with the official goal of making peaceful contact in the name of Earth's most advanced nation.

Maybe it even gave them a psychological advantage that they couldn't possibly get back to the Earth on their own now, Freyt thought as they trudged towards the Moon base. One way or another, life or death would be decided on board the Arkonide ship.

An unpleasant surprise awaited them at Armstrong Base.

After Freyt, Deringhouse, and Nyssen had made their way through the two hatches of the airlock, they realized that they weren't the first ones there. Someone had beaten them to the punch —three Russian cosmonauts!

Submachine guns at the ready, they were spread out across the central rec room in a way that gave all of them a clear shot at the newcomers.

"Welcome to Luna," said the tallest in almost accent-free English. He wore the rank insignia of a lieutenant colonel. "Calm now, friends. Don't do anything stupid, and we won't either. The Moon is big enough for all of us."

The Moon is, sure, thought Freyt, his hands in the air. *But what about the alien ship?*

Out loud, he replied, "There's an inherent explosiveness to this situation. You're in our base, which is de facto territory of the United States of America."

"De facto, tovarish, your Armstrong Base is a pile of scrap. Fighting over it would be a waste of time. Every computer and communication device has been destroyed by unknown means. I'm sure I'm not mistaken in assuming it was some unknown long-range weapon belonging to the Arkonides. If it comforts you, I hereby request retroactive permission for our intrusion. Our motivation was international solidarity between spacefarers; we wanted to

check on the crew."

"How selfless!" said Freyt sarcastically. "And?"

The Russian officer shook his head in regret. "They all suffocated days ago. As you can confirm for yourself, the air supply failed across the entire building. All that's left are the oxygen tanks both our parties have brought with us. Shall we shoot each other over them?"

"That's up to you, Lieutenant Colonel. Your finger is on the trigger."

Freyt had spent this time weighing his chances of overpowering the three Russians—two men and one woman. It was hopeless; attacking them would amount to suicide. Besides, in the short term, the available oxygen reserves were enough for everyone, and in the slightly longer term, they wouldn't suffice for even one of them.

"True. Even so, I'm offering you a ceasefire. After all, we six are the last humans left on the Moon and our outlook is hopeless if the aliens don't help us. Neither of our nations would be able to send a shuttle in time to bring us back. Nor would Russia or the US risk the lives of further crewmembers and throw away hundreds of millions more rubles or dollars on six doomed individuals. No congress, no parliament, no tsar would approve the budget for that."

"A realistic assessment," Freyt conceded. "What kind of agreement do you have in mind?"

"A temporary peace and cooperation compact. We work together to bring three of your lunar rovers into operation and travel to the Arkonides' landing site together. I, for one, am of the opinion that six people can achieve more than three. We'll postpone the argument about how to divide the spoils until we've brought down the target."

"An alliance of convenience." It was apparent that the Russians had received an identical mission from their government to the one that Freyt had been granted by President Drummond. This actually put them at odds with one another, especially as their respective

nations were making no secret of their enmity for all the world to see.

On the other hand, there was little he could say—nothing, in fact—to counter the lieutenant colonel's argument. As such, Freyt gave in to reason and accepted the poor hand he had been dealt.

"Agreed."

"Glad to hear it. Don't worry, priyateli, I'm not asking for a blood pact. Your honorable word as an astronaut is enough for me. You'll have to down a vodka or two with me later in the unlikely event we make it through this alive."

Both hands and weapons were lowered, then everyone exchanged handshakes and introduced themselves. The leader of the Russian party was called Gleb Yakunin, and his companions were Alexander Baturin and Darya Morosova. The female cosmonaut had, as far as he could see through her helmet's visor, a very pretty face with high cheekbones and reddish hair shaved into a crew cut. Freyt didn't doubt for a second that she was in no way inferior to her male colleagues when it came to skill, knowledge, or physical fitness.

After they had interred the bodies of the unfortunate crew of Armstrong Base behind the greenhouse tunnel, they took inventory. Getting the lunar rovers into a usable state proved to be no real problem. They found fully charged batteries for the electric motors in a storeroom. Also, it was the lunar day, even if its two-week phase was reaching its end. For now, the sunlight would be enough to fuel the silicon cells on the expansive wing-like solar arrays. The oxygen supplies they'd brought with them were enough to fill the three pressurised air cabins without the six astronauts having to dip into their suits' reserve tanks just yet. That said, it would only be enough for a one-way fifteen-to-twenty-hour journey to the crater where the alien ship had made its emergency landing.

But they'd already known there was no turning back.

They split up into pairs: Nyssen and Deringhouse, Baturin and Morosova, and the two leaders, Freyt and Yakunin.

After they simultaneously gave the order to depart and the lunar rovers were in motion, the Russian asked, “Would it bother you if I put on some music?”

“That depends.”

“I happen to have something on my pod that unites our two cultures in a charming way. Do you like the Leningrad Cowboys?”

“Never heard of them.”

“They’re a Finnish band. In 1993, they played a legendary concert at Senate Square with the Alexandrov Ensemble, the official choir of the Russian Red Army. They played ‘Kalinka,’ but also songs by American artists, like ‘Delilah,’ which you might remember from Tom Jones.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Or ‘Sweet Home Alabama.’ And a fantastic version of a number by Bob Dylan. That must ring a bell, right?”

“Sorry, but that name means nothing to me. 1993 was long before my time.”

Undeterred, Yakunin connected his pod to the com unit’s amplifier. “Either way, you have to hear it. It’s the best thing ever.”

Their little convoy jolted across the uneven surface of the garish gray landscape. Above it spread a pitch-black sky. The lack of an atmosphere meant there was no colorful scattered light. No stars, either; the human eye adjusted itself to the brightly lit surface and thus couldn’t perceive the comparatively weak constellations anymore. If a person did stare at the sky long enough to get used to it, when they eventually looked back at the surface, even through the darkened helmet visor, they would face the same risk of severe eye damage as looking at a solar eclipse on Earth without strong protective eyewear. At least, that was what they taught in the NASA introductory course, and Michael Freyt held to it. What did he care about the stars?

Music blared from the speakers, amounting to little more than

noise. Rock and roll, but with far too many instruments and far too many male voices. The lyrics, as far as he could make out, didn't exactly spread good cheer either.

"Knock-knock-knockin' on heaven's door..."

17.

Black Coffee

July 4, 2036

Manoli knocked once, twice, three times.

The flight to Ethiopia had passed without incident. They had reached their destination earlier than planned, shortly after midnight. Since they'd had to wait until it was light, they'd stayed the night in a pristine jungle-like grove not far from the hospital. Woken by the deafening caws of various birds, they'd nourished themselves with concentrated liquid and then hidden the Arkonide battledresses and beamers in a pit covered by leaves and branches.

Crest, who seemed encouragingly stable by now, had stayed behind in the thicket, where he was studying the colorfully speckled petals of a breed of orchid with some fascination. Manoli, meanwhile, had headed to Haggard's clinic. It was on the bank of the wide Awash River, which stretched beyond the horizon to the north and, beyond that, fed into the Red Sea. To the southwest, where it ran farther inland, the sluggish flow disappeared behind a bend after roughly a kilometer.

Most of the buildings on site were standard, unadorned containers that had been placed on a shared concrete foundation. They formed a large horseshoe with the open side facing the river. The containers had been furnished with doors and windows, and with gently sloping roofs that stuck out a long way forward and were painted bright blue. The paint looked like it had been applied recently. By one of the doorframes, a modest paper sign held up by two thumbtacks bore the name "HAGGARD."

Manoli knocked, and eventually the door was opened from the other side. A man who towered over Manoli came out, standing a good two heads taller than him. Dirty blond hair stuck out in all directions. His eyes were astonishingly blue, and his luscious lips were twisted into a hint of an irritated but good-natured smile.

A picture book doctor from a prime-time drama, thought Manoli in spite of himself. He almost felt jealous. This was exactly the kind of doctor he'd always wanted to be. *"I'm a doctor; tell me where it hurts."*

What Haggard actually said was rather less dramatic. "Morning!" He yawned heartily and rubbed his eyes. "What can I do for you?"

"Forgive me for ambushing you, Dr. Haggard."

"Forget about it. People are always showing up here unannounced. To be honest with you, I'm a bit disoriented because I've actually slept a few solid hours in a row for a change." He squinted. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"Not on a personal level, no."

"You're not from around here, I can tell that much. No, don't tell me! If I just imagine that weird mustache isn't there..."

"There's something I want to show you. Someone, actually. A very special person who's in need of your help."

The virologist wiped his face. "I do know you," he said quietly. "You're one of those crazy astronauts, aren't you?"

Manoli nodded.

"And you've brought me the alien, haven't you? The extraterrestrial. Crest da Zoltral—am I pronouncing his name right?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?" Haggard slipped on a pair of sandals that were sitting on the veranda next to the door. "Is he mobile? I mean, can he walk or do we need a stretcher?"

"The former. Follow me, please. What made you think he could be that sick?"

"I saw the footage on TV. Frankly, I've been a bit anxious and

kind of dubious about Perry Rhodan's good sense and the capabilities of his medical officer. Oh, that's you! Manoli, yeah? No offense, mate, but the symptoms were obvious to the naked eye. Secondary leukemia as a result of a virally induced immunodeficiency. Who else on this planet are you gonna turn to?"

"That's all exactly right. I just hope our pursuers don't come to the same conclusion."

"You're being followed?"

As they hurried along the riverbank, Manoli told him about the hacking attempts on the Ananthamurthy Institute in Bengaluru.

"No idea who's behind them, but it definitely wasn't a coincidence. For whatever reason, someone's running a worldwide search for us."

"You know what? Who cares? We're way off the beaten track here, and the only ones who even give a damn about my current research are a tiny group of specialists. I can't imagine any safer place on Earth for you and your Arkonide patient. Yeah, yeah, I know I'm a little bit famous, Nobel Prize and all that." Haggard pushed the fleshy leaves of a fern plant to the side. "But do you think the string-pullers of this world really care about wiping out AIDS? Quite the opposite, I can promise you. The epidemic brings them nothing but joy. Convenient way of reducing the population. They don't want to hear that education, women's emancipation, and free distribution of condoms would be a far more sustainable solution than what they're doing. They'd rather funnel all the directions to the religious zealots. It's all on purpose—the dumbing down of the masses. I could tell you some stories, mate, believe you me."

"All the important intelligence agencies keep highly paid medical advisors on staff," Manoli interjected when the Australian finally paused for breath. "I totally agree with you; it's a scandal that your valuable research and suggestions are being ignored, but that doesn't mean we can consider ourselves safe. The world is a village. Nothing stays hidden for more than a few days."

“Speaking of, how far do we have to go?”

“You’ve reached your destination,” said Crest, stepping out of his hiding place. “Let us continue this discussion at a later time. Currently, I’m in dire need of your expert help. I’d prefer not to die, at least not so soon. I have a mission to fulfill.”

They smuggled Crest in through a back door.

“There’s usually not too much going on at this early hour,” Haggard explained buoyantly. “I can dedicate myself to examining our very special patient. Meanwhile, you, Dr. Manoli, should take the chance to get some rest. You look like you have a pretty long journey behind you.”

“Eight thousand kilometers as the crow flies,” Manoli confirmed.

“We don’t have a room free,” said Haggard, “because we never have any empty beds. One hundred percent occupancy, that’s the nature of the beast. But one of the rocking chairs on the western terrace should be free around this time. Do you want a sedative?”

“No, thank you! I have to stay alert. I don’t trust the peace and quiet, as much as I wish I could. Do you really think this mustache I’ve stuck on is that unbelievable?”

“To my knowledge, I’m the only one on this humble campus who counts anatomical phenomenology among his hobbies. That being the case, I don’t think you have much to worry about. And now you’ll have to excuse me.” Haggard tapped his temple and shunted Crest into the next room.

Manoli stayed behind in the hallway, his feelings decidedly mixed. On the one hand, his meeting with the Australian Nobel Prize winner had exceeded his wildest expectations. Without question, Crest was in better hands here than anywhere else on the planet. On the other hand was the uncertainty that Manoli felt. It had been there all along, not only since the hacking scare. He was trying to do the right thing, that was for sure, but what did that even mean?

They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions. He sensed the weight of responsibility bearing down on his shoulders. Crest trusted him. Perry Rhodan trusted him.

"Eric," the latter had said. *"We all know that the situation is balanced on a knife's edge. The fate of our world is on your shoulders."*

Birds screeched outside. Somewhere nearby, someone was brewing coffee that smelled delectable, strong, black, and quaintly tar-like. Manoli recalled that this place, the bank of the Awash River, wasn't just the birthplace of humanity but was also very close to the birthplace of coffee.

He followed the inviting fragrance to a handful of patients sitting on the veranda. Their emaciated forms were arranged into a semicircle around an antiquated television. A coffee pot was being passed around. Manoli squatted beside them; someone handed him the cup as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

The doctor slurped gratefully and with abandon. The thick liquid tasted devilishly good. A child's hand offered him sugar. He declined; it would have been blasphemy to him to adulterate this flavor. The one who'd offered it whimpered miserably. Only then did Manoli look up and realize that the skinny hand didn't belong to a child but to a monkey.

The dark brown animal was about a meter tall. Its skull was small, and its round muzzle stuck out from a black face. Its tail, swinging to and fro, fanned out into a tuft at the end.

A whistle blew. Taking heed, the monkey gobbled up the sugar cubes, then toddled off, making angry noises.

"Don't be surly, please, sir," said a tall, skinny, black man. He spoke in a curious sing-song tone in English that didn't always use the right vocabulary. "My creature, he only makes fun with good intention. His name is Bezabeh; mine is Asaria. What's yours, sir?"

"Jim," Manoli replied. "Jim Johnson." The same name he'd given the clinic in Bengaluru.

“Are you a new doctor?”

“I’m visiting Professor Haggard for a while. To learn from him.”

“The professor is a good man.”

“Yes. Yes, I think so too.”

“Before, there were constant students coming, from the top and bottom of the whole world. But it’s become less and less. Can you pardon my curiosity? You’re dressed in Indian clothes, Dr. Johnson, but I take you for an American.”

“You are correct, Mr. Asaria.”

“And, not to offend you, sir, but the mustache doesn’t suit your face.”

“I’m considering shaving it off.”

“Very good.” The Ethiopian nodded enthusiastically. His smile oscillated between trustfulness and despair.

Despite his directness, Manoli didn’t find him intrusive. Asaria’s age was hard to judge; his illness and its emaciating effect had marked him. He wore a kind of military jacket with pockets high up on the sleeves, faded blue shorts, and no shoes. On his head sat a rather sloppily tied turban, from which a strip of material hung down onto his right cheek.

“The coffee is outstanding,” Manoli said commendingly, his vitality returning little by little. The sweet scents of flowers that had opened to the daylight tickled his nose.

“We also have real American TV,” said Asaria. “World TV. That’s how I acquired your language, Dr. Johnson, and from the radio.”

He barked a few syllables, incomprehensible to Manoli, at a young lady sitting next to the television. She bowed politely towards the two men, then changed the channel to an English-language news station. Currently, they had cut to a commercial break.

“Thank you, but that wasn’t really necessary.”

“What is necessary in this world, Dr. Johnson? Helping each other as much as we can, nothing else. Do you like ice hockey?”

“Excuse me?”

“I like watching ice hockey. It’s fast and often funny. Men can be like children, with beatings and pants that look like diapers. Oh, I laugh many tears when they fight each other!”

“Yes, that can definitely be amusing.” Manoli grew distracted by a report from the Gobi Desert that had appeared on the TV.

The Chinese troops who had surrounded the energy shield containing the *Stardust* were clearly preparing an assault. Meanwhile, outside of the siege ring, ten thousand people who wanted to enter Terrania had set up temporary shelters. The situation was coming to a head on both fronts.

The voice-over commentator suggested that the People’s Army were taking astoundingly good care of the “alien tourists” for now, but that it surely wouldn’t be long before they staged a strike so bloody that the historical massacre at Tiananmen Square would be nothing by comparison. Manoli could practically see him rubbing his hands together in hope and sensationalist glee.

Manoli was worried, but not too worried. He believed in Perry Rhodan and the Arkonide technology. The defensive shield was impenetrable, Crest had assured them. No matter how messy the situation, Rhodan and Bull would figure it out.

They can do this. We can do this!

And then, before long, a new future would dawn. A future where the Haggards of the world had more funding at their disposal than just the one-off prize from the Nobel Foundation. Poverty and suffering, squalor and hardship, would be a thing of the past. In principle, all illnesses were curable. Even the pathological, oh-so-human sin of greed...

“And do you know, Dr. Johnson, which sport I would love to

have in action myself one day?”

“Oh, uhm, no.”

“Skiing,” said Asaria in a gravely serious tone. “It happens all by itself. All you need is snow and two fence posts.”

“I think you might be wrong there. It’s not quite so—” He froze mid-sentence.

The scene abruptly switched back to the news studio. A special bulletin. News from the Moon, the newscaster explained. A few curt sentences followed, delivered in an insincerely professional upbeat voice.

The cup slipped out of Manoli’s hands. It smashed on the raw concrete of the veranda.

“Do you not like the taste of the coffee anymore, Doctor?”

18.

Independence Day

July 4, 2036

"Bozhe moi!" cried Gleb Yakunin.

Michael Freyt thought, *Oh my God!* It meant more or less the same thing.

The alien ship was huge. No, it was *gargantuan*. A juggernaut of a sphere that measured 492.37 meters across, according to the range finder. Almost half a kilometer! Every one of the two dozen landing struts the behemoth rested on was taller than the *Starchild*.

A ring-shaped bulge curved around the equator of the metallically shimmering sphere. Meanwhile, the edge of the crater appeared to have been cleaved at one point as if by an enormous crowbar.

"They crash-landed too," said Yakunin, having drawn the same conclusion. "Just like you, and just like us. Only they disturbed the landscape a little more in the process. And damaged their ship a lot less. Or do you see any dents?"

"By now we know what the Arkonides' defensive shields are capable of." Freyt forced himself to cast aside his awe at the artificial object sitting at the bottom of the crater. From all that was known, those on board were not green-skinned, steely-eyed monsters with tentacles but beings that looked a lot like humans and were just as mortal and fallible. "I recommend that just you and I drive down there to start with."

"Why?"

"We can keep the others in reserve for the full operation."

Yakunin laughed uproariously. "Forgive me, tovarish. Operation? Against *that*? Nothing and no one from Earth can hope to take on

this starship. Whatever your nation or mine can offer is no more than a canoe taking on an aircraft carrier! But if you insist…"

"Pull yourself together, Lieutenant Colonel. Show some backbone! Perry Rhodan made it on board this ship and wrapped the crew around his little finger. If he can do it, we can do it better."

The two of them continued on. Freyt wasn't thrilled about following the path Rhodan had already trodden. On the other hand, it lifted his spirits, spurred him on, to know that his old rival had verifiably found the entrance to the Arkonides' spacesphere. *Thanks, Perry. You've proven that it's possible.*

"Now what?" said Yakunin, his arms folded in front of his chest, before falling into a brooding silence.

Michael Freyt knew what came next. Over the few hours it had taken to descend the steep slope and reach the spherical Arkonide energy shield, he had run through the options in his head, one after the other, in an orderly military fashion. The irritating question that danced around in the back of his mind was: *What did Rhodan do?* He blanked it out as long as he could until he knew the answer.

"We get out," he replied, "and destroy the lunar rover."

"Ah, I see. The scorched earth tactic. We give a sign by burning all bridges behind us. A very Russian idea, you know?" Although Yakunin mouthed off, he didn't raise any objections. "Pathos to the point of absurdity. *Blin!* I like it. And then?"

Major Michael Freyt (USA) and Lieutenant Colonel Gleb Yakunin (Great Russia) stopped two meters from the energy shield, which shimmered with blue coldness and was presumably deadly.

"My companion and I," Freyt transmitted on all frequencies, "are emissaries from the two most powerful nations on Earth." For an instant, a fear shot through him that the Chinese might have gotten there first—but if so, it was too late regardless. "We come in peace and have been authorized by our respective governmental leaders

to negotiate with you. I'm confident that a productive working relationship can be arranged between our peoples."

No reply.

What could Rhodan have said? The unpleasant question plagued him more and more as the minutes slowly passed. *Or Bull? Nothing all that different than what I've said, surely? God knows they're both big loudmouths and buffoons, but they're not exceptionally eloquent speakers.*

While he continued to agonize over this, Yakunin switched on his transmitter without warning. "We bring vital information about your friend, Crest da Zoltral. If you leave us out here to choke to death, you'll never get to hear it. Well? Any thoughts?"

Freyt abhorred the flippant wording. But when a hole in the shape of an arch three meters tall appeared in the shield's flickering curvature, he stepped through.

It took all he had to keep from breaking into trembling cries of jubilation when the first alien he'd encountered in his life was standing before him.

The man looked disappointingly unimpressive. At first glance, he looked like the drug-addicted guitarist Freyt's father had shown him many times as a child. Freyt had been made to watch the videos streaming online as an example of what not to do with his life.

"Johnny Winter. Get a good look at him, Michael. That's how you end up if you get caught up in some big idea. When you give in to Satan's whisperings. He couldn't even stand anymore. He sat on a chair at his concerts, skinny as a skeleton. They even had to make him a special, extra-light guitar, because he couldn't take the weight of a normal instrument anymore. And for what? So he could play the blues—always the same three chords in the same twelve bars. Fanfares from the devil's songbook!"

Whirring around the Arkonide were robots that were frightening in several different ways, and strange overlapping clouds of light.

“You barbarians dare speak the name of Crest da Zoltral?” he boomed, his voice probably amplified by invisible speakers. “State your purpose!”

“Your elderly crewmate has fallen in with bad company,” said Freyt. “He’s in a kind of hostage situation. We need to pull him out of there as a matter of urgency, and with the help of your starship, I believe—”

“Ninety-two points to me!” bellowed the Arkonide, gazing with flickering red pupils at the flashing cascades above his head. “Hah! Take that, Sequeldo, and choke on it! You thought I’d be off my game because I had to let these animals on board, huh? Think again! A pox on Thora for lumbering me with command duty. I swear, I’ll...” He transitioned into another language and made jerky gestures. Bolts of light darted across the room; among all the shadows, reflections, and holograms, Freyt could not even guess at their actual size.

“Kemath da Ordsent is weary of your presence,” one of the robots buzzed. As no detailed orders have been given, you will be taken into custody for the present. Follow me. If you offer any resistance, I am authorized to terminate you.”

The robots put them in a cell with walls that flowed smoothly and seamlessly into the floor and ceiling and glowed with a dull light.

“We’re in,” said Yakunin redundantly. “Are we ever getting out again?”

“You have explosives with you, I’m sure.”

“That’s correct.”

“What are you waiting for? Blow up the door and open a path for us!”

“Right now?”

Freyt thought it over. Chances were high that Rhodan had

broken out in a similarly rough and ready fashion. Afterwards, he'd not only won his own freedom back but also abducted Crest and taken him to Earth.

"This Kemath guy... These Arkonides in general, actually. To me, it appears they're not capable of dealing with their emergency landing. The high level of their technology stands in stark contrast to their personal sense of drive."

"A bold claim. You believe the first aliens to have crossed the immense void between solar systems and make it to us have gone all soft and decadent?"

"Do you see a clean chain of command, *tovarish*? A coherent, purpose-oriented military hierarchy? I can tell you this for nothing, Lieutenant Colonel: they're losers. No wonder Rhodan managed to drag one of them away so easily."

"He'll have made the best of a bad situation."

"As usual. He took the path of least resistance. In reality, these Arkonides aren't an opponent worth facing. You've already seen the cretin who welcomed us, Yakunin. There's a real enemy for us to face, but it's not the crew."

"The ship." At last the Russian caught on, and Freyt's enthusiasm for action infected him too.

"Precisely. Put your explosive charges on the door with great care, comrade, and be prepared to move very quickly."

"We Russians don't call each other 'comrade' anymore," the lieutenant colonel chided. "Other phrases overtook it a long time ago."

"My apologies. Either way, it's time for you and I to overtake the Arkonides, whether we're doing it on the left or the right."

"Take cover, priyateli."

Bang! The hatch fell from its anchoring.

From there, Freyt and Yakunin were in a race against the robots. And there were a *lot* of robots. Some of them had neither feet nor wheels but instead appeared to float on pillows of air.

Plan A would have been to take control of the ship, perhaps by taking a high-ranking crew member hostage. But they didn't encounter a single Arkonide and were pushed into peripheral areas by the robots. Therefore, Freyt tried to bring plan B into effect, which was to seize one of the auxiliary craft.

"Auxiliary" didn't do them justice, though—every one of the sixteen round ships parked in the hangar in the equatorial ring measured a full sixty meters across!

Freyt and Yakunin failed to claim one of the craft as well. The robots shooed them away, allowing themselves to be forced into cover by the men's submachine guns only for a few seconds at most, and no doubt only because they had been programmed to minimize destruction from the crossfire as much as possible.

"High time for fresh ideas," said Yakunin, close beside Freyt with his back against the hangar wall. "Not that anything has spontaneously occurred to me. Do you have anything to offer?"

"I sure do." Michael Freyt remembered the phrasing of his orders.

"*If you see no chance of taking the ship in the name of the United States, you must destroy it. That way, it won't fall into an enemy power's clutches, at least.*" That was what the president had impressed upon him.

Freyt didn't hesitate. Plans A and B had failed. So what? He still had plan C.

The Arkonides' starship was a marvel of gigantomania. But among his comparatively primitive gear, he carried a marvel of fiendish malice. There were two explosive devices: the conventional detonator, which he was activating at this very moment—and the nuclear bomb that would blossom a second and a half later.

A second and a half. The rest of his life, starting now, tick-tick-tick. Enough time for triumphant thoughts.

Alarm sirens rang out throughout the ship; overwhelming impulses blew through all the fuses of Freyt's com equipment. But that didn't matter anymore.

It was the fourth of July, the national day of the United States. He thought of the ratification of the Declaration of Independence by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776—the founding act of his nation. Since then, countless men and women had defended the independence of their homeland, with their lives if necessary. And now, *now* it was happening again.

Freyt saluted. His hand didn't quite make it to his temple, but he had won. In a fireball, in a chain reaction of explosions that escalated into a firework of tremendous proportions, he vanished; the Arkonide ship vanished; a future that his president had ordered him to prevent vanished.

As far as Michael Freyt believed, he died a hero.

Epilogue

News and Tidings

Bai Jun was as good as his word, even in the negative sense. As soon as his ultimatum expired, down the second, he launched his barrage. Chinese artillery fired at them from thousands of guns.

The shield held. The explosions were so blinding, however, that they could hardly see a thing. It even overpowered the Arkonide suits' glare compensators. And along with it came the noise, which was immediately unbearable. "Deafening" would have been an understatement.

"Scary stuff!" called Reginald Bull amid the booming of the shots. "But this won't frighten us. Right, Perry?"

Rhodan gave no response, appearing unmoved. With the toe of his boot, he drew lines in the desert sand.

"The Chinese general will see how pointless this is, won't he? He can't crack the energy shield. He thinks he can demoralize us, but he hasn't got a chance in hell. Right, Perry?"

Around Bull, a city continued to grow out of the dust, undisturbed, as if outside of time and space. Terrania. A big idea, although still uninhabited.

"I don't make a habit of criticizing you," Bull roared, "but I wouldn't exactly be disappointed if you told me what your plan was. You know, just casually between friends."

Above them, cruise missiles crashed against the wall of energy one after another in quick succession, causing nothing other than psychological damage. However, the visual and aural side effects were, to put a positive spin on them, thoroughly spectacular.

"We've put one foot over the threshold," said Perry Rhodan. "We've entered a new phase of human history. There's no way back,

no secret master plan. We don't need one anyway. We don't have to do anything except stay true to our ideals."

"Which are?"

An angel flew over the peaks of the Himalayas. With wings of light, shrouded in an indestructible cloak of energy.

But Clark Flipper was too late, and he knew it.

After getting his bearings with the help of his topographical data bank, he descended to the slope of Annapurna I, the tenth highest mountain on Earth. The name came from Sanskrit and referred to food and nourishment. It was also the name of a goddess; maybe the feminine connection was why Beth had been determined to take part in the expedition.

The southern face of Annapurna I and the ridges of Annapurna South and Machapuchare enclosed an isolated mountain basin called the Annapurna Sanctuary. From the base camp there, Beth's party had climbed up around 4,200 meters, a rope team of four—and never returned.

The Annapurna wasn't one of the more difficult eight-thousanders to climb in a technical sense, but due to the extreme risk of avalanches, it was one of the most dangerous.

An avalanche was indeed what had sealed the fate of Beth and her companions. After a long search, Flipper found their corpses at the foot of a slope, hundreds of meters below the main trail across the south face. Beth must have survived for quite a while, as she was clutching a letter between her fingers.

Flipper took it. *I'm almost certain that you'll come and find me, Clark. I wish I had you with me in these last moments. Cry for me, but not too much. Go on living. And never forget: the horizon is not the limit. Fly, my beloved! Fly!*

Flipper buried the remains of Beth and her friends in the Himalayan ice. Then he launched and let his super cool suit fly on

its own, going long enough and far enough to not know where he was anymore.

"Good news!" called Dr. Frank Haggard, waving Manoli into his office, where Crest sat on a gurney and looked similarly cheerful. "I've completed my initial examinations, and successfully, I would say."

"He believes he can cure me!" Crest beamed.

"I *hope*," Haggard corrected him. "Let's say I'm cautiously optimistic. The treatment comes with plenty of risks. Your alien friend's metabolism means I have to improvise in a lot of ways."

"I'm ready and willing to take that risk," Crest announced. "Eric, I can hardly express how much the prospect of being cured has revitalized me! I'll be able to return to the *Aetron* and conclude my mission. Not before giving humanity a suitable thank-you, of course."

Manoli awkwardly fell silent. Above Haggard's desk was a TV; it was turned on, but luckily only showing a rugby game.

"What's wrong?" Crest asked. "Aren't you happy?"

"Oh, I am. I was just...speechless with relief." He couldn't bring himself to tell the Arkonide the truth. Crest wouldn't have been able to bear it.

According to the special bulletin that Manoli had seen shortly before, a powerful tremor had been detected on the Moon. Per the newscaster's speculation, it was a quake so strong that instruments on Earth could measure it without the slightest difficulty.

Eric Manoli knew better. There were never any quakes on the Moon. Never. That meant there was only one explanation for the violent tremor: something very large must have exploded.

Someone had destroyed the *Aetron*.

In all likelihood, Crest da Zoltral was the last living Arkonide in

the solar system.

Episode 4: Ellert's Visions

By Wim Vandemaan

The year 2036:

Since landing the Stardust in the Gobi Desert, Perry Rhodan and his crew have been besieged. They are being protected from attacks by an energy dome erected by the alien technology of the Arkonides.

The scientist Crest, one of those aliens, is severely ill, and help for him is only available on Earth. Therefore, he is currently staying in Ethiopia, where he is being well taken care of, far from the center of civilization. But the pursuers are hot on his heels...

Meanwhile, in the Gobi Desert, the situation is escalating. Countless people are making their way to the Stardust *landing site, hoping to reach Perry Rhodan, whose concept of a utopia fascinates them.*

One among the crowd is a young man from Munich who possesses special abilities. His name is Ernst Ellert, and his vision leads to a dramatic encounter.

The Energetic Pilgrim

Everything was white. White like snow in the winter sun. Only from the changing contours, the hardly visible lines indicating topographic highs and lows, hills and hollows and wide terrains, did he recognize that he was moving.

He was flying. Possibly at a great height. Or maybe very close to the ground.

Where was he flying? He'd find out eventually. He didn't have a destination in mind, but there was a sort of implicit lure towards which he geared himself.

What were the kinds of places that attracted people? Mountain peaks emerging from rain clouds? The coastline of a new world visible on the horizon after an endless sea voyage? Illuminated windows seen from in the deepest, darkest night?

Something of that sort. A magnetic pull.

What attracted him was in the middle of the white land. He detected a bubble of energy. Something stabilized that bubble and gave it the solidity of a dome, a bell.

He thought he heard it toll. A white sound. What else?

Something had risen from the dome, a white vehicle with a gleaming white heart. He pondered whether he should follow this vehicle. It would have been possible. It was his decision. The dream —for what else could this be?—gave him that choice.

But he let the spacecraft with the white heart fly and turned to the dome. That energy dome turned out to be a witch's realm, a labyrinthine utopia. It was a sheer membrane with no measurable extension in depth, an endless kingdom of pure dynamics, power and feistiness. He could have wandered through this layer endlessly, losing himself in it, being absorbed by it, a disembodied, energetic pilgrim.

But he wormed his way out. He sank from the zenith of the dome, a snowflake of white spirit in the white land.

At the bottom, a man was sitting on a couch. The couch was in a room underground. He was exhausted. Everything was tedious. It was almost agony just to keep his eyes open. As if the man was the guard who wasn't allowed to sleep. What was he guarding?

The future, he thought.

What else?

At last, the man on the couch gave in. He lay down and slept.

He had no difficulty penetrating the man's dreams. His tiredness was deep and reached him even in his slumber. Within the dream, the man was simply lying there, his head on his arm.

He touched him ever so gently. The man opened his eyes—if only in the dream. He gave him an invisible sign, and the man looked up. The ceiling, the ground above him? No hindrance.

The man felt the pull of the stars. He thought, *Anyone who wants to go there also needs a place to go back to. A home. A city.*

Yes, thought the man.

He saw the city arise before his sleeping eyes.

The man watched and thought, *A white city.*

What else? the other thought in return. To his astonishment, he saw himself wandering the streets between the sky-high homes, albeit in a strangely transformed guise. Black as the night.

So he cautiously withdrew.

First Part

Thora

June 30 to July 4, 2036

Under the radiant dome

By the late evening of July 4, 2036, the noise had long since surpassed what was tolerable. The Chinese tanks and rocket launchers had zeroed in on their immobile target. The detonations were barely perceptible as individual events by now.

Perry Rhodan stood unprotected and without a helmet under the radiant dome. He felt as if he had sunk into a sea of sound waves. It was a deeply transparent, even invisible, sea. No sensible differentiation could be made anymore between hearing and numbness. Silence was a distant and slowly fading memory, like that of water in the desert.

Rhodan barely felt Bull tapping him on the shoulder. He turned towards him. Bull's slightly receding hairline glistened with sweat. His mouth was pinched tight, his face paler than usual. He didn't even try to speak. With his lips pressed together, he beckoned to his friend.

Rhodan nodded and followed him. They walked toward the *Stardust* which, like the entire surroundings of their life, lay under the transparent shell of energy. Where did the protective field generator actually draw this energy from? The question was stuck in Rhodan's mind and couldn't be ignored anymore. His thoughts were moving viscously and unwillingly in the abyss of this acoustic underworld.

"Why are you doing this to yourself?" asked Bull after they closed the *Stardust* door behind them. He spoke as loudly as possible without screaming. Even their spacecraft couldn't shield them from the continuous thundering of the detonations. But just having the sounds muffled was already a relief.

“I wanted to think,” Rhodan answered.

They went into the cockpit. It had gotten narrower since they had anchored the Arkonide formchair inside. Its thrust absorber allowed for much higher acceleration rates than would have been tolerable for humans without protection. And the *Stardust* also owed this fantastic novelty to the Arkonides’ technological upgrades.

Rhodan had to smile briefly when it occurred to him that the Chinese had been said to have a certain tendency toward product piracy in the early years of the 21st century. *Peanuts against what we’re doing now,* he thought.

He looked out of the window. The drumfire under which the radiant dome caused more than the acoustic inferno. The play of lights, at times wan, at times blinding, seemed more alien than anything he had encountered on the Moon or aboard the Arkonide starship.

Bull pointed at the two helmets lying on the mountings and made a quizzical face. Should they put them on and communicate over the radio?

Rhodan shook his head. Too risky. They had no idea whether their besiegers possessed the technical means to intercept them, or to what extent. Instead, they put their heads close together, talking directly into each other’s ears in turn.

“Think?” asked Bull. “Well, out there seems to be the ideal place for meditation.”

Rhodan waved the jest aside. “Have you been in contact with Manoli and Crest?”

“No,” his friend answered. “I’ve tried to reach them time and time again. No chance. I can’t get through because of the interfering transmitters.

“Thora?”

Bull shook his head. “Our hypercom transmitter can’t connect to the Arkonide spaceship’s computer. Thora isn’t responding. Nobody

on the *Aetron* is responding."

Rhodan nodded imperceptibly. "That's not good."

"Never mind," Bull replied. "As if we don't have any other worries... Thora is probably going on a trip. Maybe she's just looking around the Earth, buying shoes, shooting down armies or doing whatever Arkonide women do when they're bored. And the rest of the crew are probably busy with some virtual hijinks."

Again, Rhodan nodded. *Hijinks.* A rather appropriate expression. Although during his time on board the *Aetron*, he had gained the impression that for the Arkonides, this game drew the line between the cultured spiritual beings—they themselves—and more animal-like creatures—humans, monkeys, and the like. Neither Rhodan nor Bull understood the meaning, purpose or rules of this complex, artistic-strategic entertainment where mental and positronic processes intermingled in opaque ways.

"You don't believe that," stated Rhodan.

"No," Bull admitted. "The *Aetron* is in difficulty. What should we do?"

"We'll take a look."

"'We' in the sense of *we*, or in the sense of *I*?"

Rhodan grinned. "*We* in the sense of *you*, please," he said. "I'm staying here. But surely no one needs to know that apart from us."

"Then I'll be the first person to fly to the Moon alone."

"The *Stardust* is good to go?"

The pilot nodded. "You bet. I've optimized it a little with some equipment from our Arkonide sponsors."

"When can you launch?"

For a brief moment, the noise lessened. The sudden relief made them both groan quietly. Then the cacophony returned, louder than

ever.

“Immediately,” said Bull.

“Let’s wait until after midnight,” Rhodan suggested. “That will minimize the risk.”

“Maybe.”

Of course, Rhodan didn’t expect it to become that dark. The Chinese army’s powerful spotlights were directed right at them, bathing this small section of the Gobi in a shadowless, surgical light. But the soldiers were people, and people—even when given amphetamines and other stimulants—eventually got tired, became erratic and inattentive.

“And if it’s urgent on board the *Aetron*?”

“Maybe it was urgent hours ago,” said Rhodan. “And if so, you’ll be too late anyway.”/p>

New Start

She sat by herself in the *Aetron*'s control center. She had asked the other crew members to go to their accommodations. Then she had tilted the commander's seat back slightly and looked at the ceiling. The holoprojection created the impression of looking directly into the starry sky.

She thoughtfully contemplated the planet that seemed to float almost within reach above her. It was Arkon. The three-dimensional display was so clear and sharp that she thought she was seeing her homeland from orbit.

She tried to recall scenes from her childhood and youth. The Academy of Stellar Warfare where, along with other students, she had studied strategy, tactics, and logistics, in whose virtuariums she had experienced the battles of the Methane Wars: as a simple space soldier, an officer, a spacecraft captain. She had participated in landing operations, devised and mapped out new supply routes while being far behind the front line. She had served as a fire-control and detection officer, and had issued her orders as a commander. All without setting foot outside the military academy and into the real world.

When had the horror first gripped her? Perhaps during the operation in sector Qoz IV, when they, part of a space landing unit, were sent to reconquer a city that the Methanes had flooded with toxic gas.

A strange excitement had seized her, even though she knew the battle had been fought eons earlier. That the planet had broken into pieces, that the Arkonide fleet, while not saving any lives, had snatched sector QoZ IV away from the Methane Breathers, albeit with irresponsibly heavy losses.

Her landing approach; her ejection a few hundred meters above ground; her advance under the cover of her robots. Gradually, she had realized that something was going wrong. At first, she had thought the Methane Breathers were pursuing a new strategy. Or that the Positronic controlling the virtuarium wanted to put her to

the test.

But then she had noticed it was neither the Positronic nor any unexpected ingenuity on the part of the simulated Methane Breathers. The rows next to her thinned out not because resistance was unusually strong or insurmountable but because her fellow students had rushed into the defensive fire with their protective shields deactivated. As though they were looking for death. Which, of course, was not real death.

For a long time she had suspected the others were simply not interested in the operation in the virtuarium…that they wanted to escape the annoying chore and that their liquidation in the simulation was the most convenient way back to their fictitious game consoles.

Only over time had she learned it was something else. That the fallen reported right back for the next operation. Later, she witnessed the crews of virtual cruisers and battleships lead their crafts to their doom with mild amusement, sometimes even with an unusual enthusiasm. How they responded to the glare of virtual fire indicating the destruction of their unit by the Methane Breathers with laughter, with applause. Life as a devalued routine, each Arkonide cared for by an entire machine park. Death as the last adventure. Living the scenario over and over, thanks to the virtuariums.

She caught herself imagining how the two planetarians would behave in such a scenario. Disgruntled, she swiped the thought away. It was enough that the two of them—Rhodan and Bull—had surreptitiously gained access to her ship. She wouldn't tolerate their presence in her thoughts as well.

"Change the image," she ordered.

"Which system do you wish to see?" the starship brain asked.

There were innumerable solar systems, countless worlds that the Positronic could have visualized for her. Thora had always loved to imagine the Great Imperium as a vessel, a glass sphere, replenished with stars. No one, no living being, anyway, knew all the names of

the solar systems that belonged to the Imperium, let alone the names of the populated or sheltered planets. Even as a child, she had always thought it a legend that the regent knew all those names; an entertaining legend, but one worth preserving, as Crest had taught her.

“Do you believe it, then, this legend?” she had asked him at the time.

He had laughed. “I believe in legends only if they’re true. But if they were true, they wouldn’t be legends.”

Of course, it wasn’t necessary for any living being to know these countless names or the coordinates either. Names and positional data rested in the positronic archives of their people, managed and secured by the great artificial brains of their civilization.

The vessel of the Imperium. Its imaginary, invisible and yet so secure border. The membrane of the star empire, impenetrable to enemies. Was this how she had imagined life beyond? She remembered the first days after the accident on the satellite. A reluctance to the point of physical nausea overcame her when she thought of the crew’s lethargy. Of their silent contentment that the expedition had been interrupted, if not canceled. A never-ending layover on the satellite that the expedition leaders were supposed to use as a pause for reflection, as some crew members had rumored. Loudly enough to be generally audible.

She simply couldn’t think of any Imperium world she wished to see.

“Show me Terra!” she said angrily.

A black planet appeared in the holographic firmament, the opposite side of Earth from the sun. Here and there, luminous patches shimmered through a puffy blanket of clouds. Those were the urban centers. They were spread unevenly across the globe.

Somewhere there, in the dimly lit darkness, was Crest.

How much darkness do we take on if we want to live? Thora

wondered. She imagined her mentor, towering but weak, between the two Terrans, Rhodan and Bull.

Down there, where Crest was, it was Monday, June 30 of the year 2036. Until now, Thora hadn't asked herself what this chronology referred to. What battle might the timesetters have fought back then? What people might have been subjugated? What doom might have been brought upon the world that they were still remembered after more than two thousand orbits around the sun? She would check eventually.

It was so quiet in the center that Thora could hear her own breaths. A ship that didn't fly was like a sleeping creature. The life-sustaining organs followed their routines. The heart beat, the liver detoxified, the lungs drank oxygen. Consciousness wasn't necessary.

Thora closed her eyes and imagined the processes that were going on in the depths of the hull: the generation and distribution of energy that fed the defensive shield; the inhalation and exhalation of the ship's air, which was filtered, purified and enriched with health preserving substances in the circulation systems; the heating of the atmosphere, the creation of light.

She thought of the machinery controlling the water tanks, of the installations preparing the food and recovering it from excretions where necessary. She thought of the therapeutic-diagnostic programs by which the ship's brain supervised and guarded the physical health of the crew members, protecting them from harm if they were in danger. Of the programs that, if damage nevertheless occurred, ordered those affected to the ship's med-station, where they were treated, their blood composition brought to the desirable state, where bone substance was renewed, vision and hearing optimized, and, if necessary, organs removed and replaced with new and genetically tailored ones.

Provided the necessary means and resources were available.

Unfortunately, the sleep that this ship was in wasn't a healing one. The vessel itself had suffered some damage, possibly irreparable. It was unable to help itself or the Arkonides aboard, the care, healing, and protection of whom should have been its job.

For that matter, these Arkonides didn't seem to be particularly distressed by the ship's blatant failure to perform some of its tasks. It fed and watered them, it provided the energy for their games, and it cut them off from the hostile outside world.

"Commander," the Positronic reported, "your emotional signature has changed significantly. Do you like the picture of the planet? Does it upset you? Or are you becoming unbalanced because you are lacking erotic satisfaction?"

Thora raised her arms from the med-sensitive armrests of the pneumo seat. Through these surfaces, the ship's brain kept in touch with her, gathering information about her physical state and determining from this data the state of her psyche.

That was right and proper, as the ship had to know whether its commander was awake or tired, fully focused or distracted, if the commands being given were informed by strategic reasoning or by an insane mind whose confusion could endanger the lives of the crew or even the existence of the ship itself, which belonged not to the commander or the crew but to the Imperium. The brain had to know whether its leader was apt to command or whether they should be removed so that the ship could find its salvation in the light of the positronic programs.

Thora contemplated all this, trying not to be outraged by the deeper meaning of these orders. She didn't succeed.

"Commander?" asked the ship.

"Who would you recommend?" she asked offhandedly.

"To satisfy your sexual needs? Galoth da Phathane. Since our launch, he has been receiving the highest ratings from his partners. He is considered athletic, vivacious, and imaginative."

"He is below my level," Thora said.

"I have observed that even those female biological components of the ship who are close to or equal to your status tend to derive pleasure from mating with Galoth."

“Well, I am happy for those female biological components,” said Thora. She opened her eyes and stared at the console that concealed a part of the Positronic. She thought how she and the other Arkonides on board might appear to this artificial mind.

The biological components—weren’t they deadweight already? How many useless tasks did they create for the ship? The generation of light and heat, the care of the physiological substrate, the risk of irrational decisions, damage, possibly the total loss of imperial property, just because the commander was sexually underchallenged yet again.

“I want to hear what we are currently receiving from the third planet.”

“There is no report from Crest that I have withheld from you.” Was she mistaken, or did the voice with which the ship’s brain spoke sound almost amused?

“I want to hear the broadcasts of the planet-born,” she specified.

“What preselection should I make? Cultural topics, politics, military strategy?”

“I don’t suppose the planet-born are planning a war against us.” Now it was her turn to be amused. “And if so, they wouldn’t necessarily warn us of their objectives through their public media.”

“No,” admitted the brain. “While going through their historical archives, I noticed that they do indeed have a certain elementary strategic cunning.”

“So be on your guard,” the commander advised.

“I am anyway,” the Positronic replied.

“Anyway,” thought Thora, *it’s because of this perpetual prudence that we are stuck on this satellite of an overpopulated planet.*

“Attention,” announced the Positronic. “I’ll let you hear a little of the acoustic messages my probes are picking up.”

The blaring of the third planet. Voices upon voices talking, asking, announcing, promoting, and warning in the strange languages of their world. Every now and then, she thought she understood a word or two uttered in the language she and Crest had learned via hypnotraining.

But it wasn't just speech. She listened carefully.

The Positronic guessed what Thora was concentrating on. "That's an aria from an Italian opera. The composer is called Giacomo Puccini. This one is very popular."

Thora remained cool. If the Positronic thought recommending Galoth to her as a lovemaking partner was a good idea, it might as well think the commander could take a liking to a catchy tune from Earth.

"Translate it for me!" she demanded.

The song seemed to be about a palace where total sleeplessness reigned. The people in the city—Beijing—found no rest either. The princess had ordered them to determine the name of the singer. If they failed, she would execute them. This, of course, was a strong argument for keeping their eyes open. The princess had mastered the art of governing, it seemed.

On the other hand, Thora herself lay sleepless in her cold chamber. Obviously, this was a song from a time when the Terrans lacked even the most primitive heating technologies. The singer promised the princess that he would triumph the following morning, not over the poor thermal supply of the palace rooms, but —no doubt in the sexual sense—over the princess herself.

Hence the popular nature of the song.

"It's good," she commented.

The sounds faded away. Again, everything was quiet. Thora felt as if she were cast in glassite or bound and manipulated by restraining fields, incapable of any movement of her own free will.

She felt rage against everyone and everything. Against the ship

and its material flaws, against the men and women on board who had accepted their accident uncomplainingly because they had more important things to do (for example, rating each other after each sexual act had been completed). Or those who were traveling through their own cosmos, creators, maintainers and destroyers of mental universes in which the real world faded to a distant, meaningless memory.

It wasn't that she had no sympathy for the fictitious players. She knew the attraction that these purely mental works of art exerted. She had played them long enough herself, and she was entitled to call herself a master.

But eventually disgust had seized her, the sickness of these high feelings, as the games provided them, without even a grain of reality corresponding to them. An aimless idling. The entire Imperium had become idle. Except for men like Crest.

But even towards Crest, Thora now felt anger. Why had he left her in this wreck and flown away with the Terrans? She could have taken off in an auxiliary craft and simply seized everything she needed from Earth, gathered healers and healing powers onto the ship, in safety and at her disposal.

Instead Crest had confided in these planet-borns, whose eyes gleamed with greed for the Arkonide machines. And there was, finally, anger at herself because she was sitting helplessly in the *Aetron*, in this mighty machine, which hadn't produced anything but lethargy for days.

"Commander?" the ship's brain called. "I am detecting your unease. May I offer you a sedative?"

Commander. What exactly was she even commanding now?

"No," she said. "Compile a list of the most capable men and women on the ship. Leave aside how they've rated each other intimately."

Thora had expected thirty, maybe twenty crew members. The

ship nominated twelve. Only eleven of them even bothered to come to the control center. Among them was her second-in-command, Kemath. Besides him, two other men had shown up. The other eight were women.

Galoth was just over two meters tall, sinewy, his face rugged and disfigured by *Lashat* pocks. He hadn't had them neutralized but wore them instead like decorative scars. Thora wondered, not for the first time, how he had managed to survive the disease. Or were the scars simply well-made fakes? His white hair was cut remarkably short.

Without further ado, he sat down in one of the pneumo seats in front of the control console and threw a bored glance at the holomonitors. Most of them showed the lifeless surroundings of the satellite. Earth was visible on some.

"Interesting," Galoth observed. A nostalgic smile flitted across his face. "By all accounts, a planet boiling over with life."

Pernoc steered his lounger over to Galoth. "In the billions. Hundreds of millions are starving. Their planet is slowly heating up. Plague waves, and the weakening of their immune systems. Industrial poisonings. Their machines are running out of power. Their nuclear weapons are ready for use. Is it true that Crest is down there?"

Galoth's smile deepened. "He's a romantic. I've always said so. Is he going to die down there?"

Although it was clearly beneath her dignity, Thora disagreed. "The Terrans have offered to heal him."

Galoth laughed incredulously. "The...what? I'll sooner get rapture from a ballet of Naats than these blathertarians will heal Crest. What did the ship say about it?"

"It's Crest's decision," Thora said coldly. As if it were her job to defend this madness.

Penorc looked from Galoth to Thora in consternation. "Crest's

decision? What do we have the ship's brain for if decisions of such magnitude are made by the person concerned? Kemath, you let him go?"

"I was accorded the same attention as the ship's brain," said Kemath, bowing ironically in Thora's direction. "Our decision-making commander didn't ask me for advice."

"You are forgetting yourself," Thora warned without raising her voice.

A cloud of light flared over Penorc's lounger. He muttered an apology and leaned back. The pneumo couch let him sink in by a hand's width. The contouring foam encased his body.

He brought a transportable fictitious projector, Thora realized, but she could not see the device. *He had it implanted,* she concluded reluctantly.

The old Suuloi, along with the seven younger women, had followed their discussion without comment. Now she raised her voice, which sounded old and papery. The biomechanical panes on her face shifted over each other, scraping. It looked machine-like, but her eyes were still alive. She had already traveled on the *Aetron* before Thora was born. Suuloi da Kunkor was said to have set foot on a planet only once as an infant.

Ship legends.

"So, that's what you believe, Thora? Crest is seeking a cure from these creatures?"

"Yes," the commander replied. "He's looking for it there because he can't find it on board."

Kemath turned his whole heavy body towards her. "The ship provides us with everything we need. The sanitation programs are underway. He just needed a little patience."

Suuloi made an erratic gesture with her left hand. "Do you mean the fictitious look-alike available to you on your mental playground or the real *Aetron?*"

Kemath smiled tiredly. “I have long since given up trying to make *realists* like you understand just to what degree my mental design outperforms reality, and what profit the reality which you so irrationally exaggerate might gain from that design.”

Suuloi laughed shortly—or maybe it was a cough. “This surrender serves you yourself best. It relieves you of the need to form clear sentences. I don’t understand a word of your ramblings.”

“You should have your language centers optimized, then you’d stand a chance of being able to cope with my sentence structures.”

While Kemath was speaking, Penorc steered his lounger towards the exit. Sliding past Thora, he murmured, “Thank you for the invitation. You’ll excuse me if I no longer dampen this cheerful circle with my presence. Should there be any news about Crest, please keep me updated.”

Kemath, meanwhile, pointedly focused his attention on the cloud of a thousand colors that had built up like a dome of light over Galoth’s head. The highly complex structures were changing rapidly. Thora recognized math-musical theorems of the Da Kluph school unfolding in paraevolutionary transformations. She saw the building and shifting of strategic architectures into metahistorical and hypergeometric spaces, all at once of untameable vitality and ascetic precision, both in explosive motion and enraptured balance, a luminous, translucent mystery.

She struggled to break away from the expressive exhilaration, the pulsation of the images. “Please save the statuses of your games!” she ordered. “You can go back to them later.”

A blink of Galoth’s eyes, and the psychogenic miracle expired. “And now?” he asked coldly.

“You’re responsible for the condition of the corvettes and auxiliary crafts,” she said. “You are to report.”

“I wish to have it noted in the ship’s log that you called me to the center for a trivial matter that you could have obtained from the ship’s brain at any time,” he answered. “When we return to Arkon

and the expedition is subject to review..."

"We won't return to Arkon," Suuloi interrupted him.

"That may be true for you."

Thora observed that Kemath followed their verbal duel with mild amusement. She stopped the argument with a wave of her hand.

"You're right," she said to Galoth. "I allow you to leave the center at your own discretion. You too," she informed Kemath.

"The protocol will remain unaffected by this, I hope," stated Galoth, who had risen to his feet and was stretching comfortably. "I am awaiting the review on Arkon with interest."

"You do that."

"Oh," Galoth continued, "keep in mind that Crest may not be on your side as an advocate. He's old." He stared at Suuloi unabashedly.

"No one chooses their dying companions," the elderly Arkonide replied.

After the men had left the center, Thora inquired about the state of the auxiliary fleet. The Positronic informed her that, of the six small spherical ships that had been largely operational before the accident, three were functional. The internal maintenance routine had cannibalized the remaining ships without restoring the *Aetron* itself to airworthiness. Of the smaller, highly maneuverable reconnaissance ships, nine were still without defects.

"Even assuming the removal of the translight drives of all auxiliary crafts and the construction of a drive compound for one ship," the Positronic explained, "we won't reach Imperial territory by ourselves. I recommend again that we send out a hypercom emergency call."

"That won't be necessary. We're not in acute mortal danger," Suuloi noted.

Thora wondered what reason the old woman could have for fending off any thought of returning home. For a moment, she had the crazy vision of watching her roam the *Aetron* and sabotage the hyperdrive. Who knew madness in all its aspects?

She scrutinized the women. She had exchanged more than a few words with only a few of them. Of course, she knew their names offhand. Amuui and Thapu, the two cultural scientists who had devoted themselves to the study of non-humanoid cultures. Earth had to be a disappointment to them, a primitive caricature of Arkonide civilization. Yvina da Sei had confessed, Thora did not know when, to an archaic religion, deities who thirsted for blood, and to whom all reason was detestable; their charismatic, horrifying prophets. Yvina's cabin had been turned into a temple. She had once invited Thora to visit. The missionary attempt had failed spectacularly.

Quiniu Soptor stood apart, as always. As soon as she moved in the light, bluish reflections moved over her black skin. At first glance, the rusty red fuzz on her head could have been mistaken for hair; but it was a dress of long-shafted, very fine red feathers. Soptor, as usual, kept the gaze of her eyes with the silver irises humbly lowered to the ground. Quiniu's mother, a da Blaccour, was said to have forgotten herself in a remote colonial world with a native whose genetic material had not permitted itself to be entirely erased from the embryo. According to other rumors, she had sprung from the self-fertilization of one of her mother's eggs, a procedure that had been initiated reproductively, not without bringing the genetic material of the offspring closer to the extravagant tastes of the sprout mother.

Crest had lobbied for her inclusion in the crew. Thora had never understood why. So far, Soptor had not exhibited any special abilities.

Ghyva, Tamika, and Ple were shockingly young, halfway to being children. The three of them had squeezed into a single pneumo seat and followed the conversation with their eyes wide open. All three of them were staying at the center for the first time.

Thora sensed Suuloi's calm gaze resting upon her. The old lady

forced a mask-like smile. “The Imperium’s flower,” she said. “Its nectar.”

Thora wasn’t sure whom she meant: the three men who had so entirely left the field to them or the assembled women.

This was all a mistake, she thought. *I should never have summoned anyone to the center. I shouldn’t have let Crest go. I should have removed him from the influence of those planet-born men. This whole voyage was a mistake.*

Suuloi approached her with small, cumbersome steps. “You’re doing a good job,” the old lady offered.

Thora froze inwardly. What had she done to deserve this intimacy? “I am not aware of having done anything worth mentioning,” she replied.

“Sometimes the best thing is to open up possibilities.”

“What possibilities?”

“You let the aliens on board. You talked to them. You let Crest go to their world.”

“You seem to be more enthusiastic about my actions than I am. As of they weren’t Crest’s actions in the first place.”

“Crest is your ally,” Suuloi insisted. It sounded as if the old woman were trying to comfort her.

“I should have accompanied him. I have ways and means of enforcing the handing over of planetary healers and their medical instruments.”

“You still have them.”

“Yes,” said Thora. “We all have power. And we have all the time in the world.” She looked at the women one after the other. Suuloi, standing like a forgotten statue in a forgotten garden. The three young Arkonides, huddled together like young, tired animals. Yvani, watching everything with an expression of malicious joy, as

if the crash and everything else were a destiny that her spiteful gods had assigned to the *Aetron.* Amuui and Thapu, who had displeasure written all over their faces over all the lost time. Quiniu Soptor, who had no business here at all.

All of us, each one of us, are fighting a losing battle, Thora thought.

She couldn't bear the inaction any longer and stood up. "I thank you for coming. I'll keep you informed about any further developments."

Thora thought for a time. Then she consulted briefly with the ship's brain. The central Positronic presented her with probabilities and risks, but it didn't dissuade her. She contacted Kemath over the vidphone.

"I'll leave the ship for a while," she announced. "Come to the center. Take command."

Kemath hesitated. "I'm asking for time to think it over."

"Time to think it over?" She had trouble maintaining her composure. She had given him an order.

Kemath smiled apologetically. "With all sympathy for you, I don't see any situation that would require a command. Nothing, at any rate, that in the current phase of the accident the routine of the ship's brain couldn't handle faster and more reliably than I could."

Thora was wondering whether she should praise this fit of self-recognition when Kemath continued, "So, why should I waste my time at the center? You'll understand that under these conditions, I prefer to spend my time where I am indispensable."

He smiled charmingly and cut off the connection. Thora considered following his advice and leaving the *Aetron* entirely in the care of the ship's Positronic. Then she called Suuloi. She described the situation to her, and Suuloi sat down in the commander's seat, tilting it backwards. The old lady sighed briefly; whether from pain or relief, Thora couldn't tell.

Suuloi looked up at the projection vault, where the dark side of Earth was still visible. "You're thinking of him," she remarked.

"Of course I am. I wish I knew how he was doing. If there's any chance of healing him."

"Crest?"

"Of course Crest."

The old lady's lips twisted into an indecipherable smile. "I had supposed you were thinking of the planet-born. Of one of them. I watched the recording of your interrogation. He argues cleverly, that one." She chuckled. "The way he speaks about the *Aetron,* this *miracle*, as evidence of the moral maturity of the people who built it. Why didn't we notice that? We designers of such machines must be ethically sophisticated creatures."

"Nonsense," Thora said.

"But it certainly is nonsense." Suuloi sounded amused. "What was he chattering about when he marched towards the energy dome? About dreamers. The good. Faith. The cradle. Home. One who communicates such keywords needs no more arguments. Then the finale: *Don't disappoint our faith.* And lo and behold"—she made a dismissive hand gesture—"the dome is already collapsing. Not after hours of pinpoint bombing but from an emotional appeal."

"It wasn't my decision."

"Really? Then it was Crest's. Knowing him, he didn't make that decision for his own good or for theirs. It was for *your* good. What's that man's name again, the man from Earth?"

"Perry Rhodan."

"Exactly," said Suuloi, as if she had won a long dispute. "I guess that's his name." She demonstratively looked up at the dark planet. "Now he has Crest in his grasp. And he who has Crest has you. Whoever disposes of you disposes of the ship."

Thora laughed out loud. "With the ship, he would have gained little."

Suuloi looked at her with unusual severity. "Are you sure?"

"You are blaming me because we let them on board," noted Thora.

"You are wrong. I understand you very well. After all, Rhodan wants something that the male crew members seem indifferent to."

For an instant, Thora feared that Suuloi would get carried away by innuendo. The confidentiality of the conversation made her helpless. She had to end it.

"I don't know what he wants."

"But it's obvious," the old woman said, heaving a laugh as brittle as a cast-off dry leaf. "He wants to survive."

Before Thora left the center, she took one last look at the old woman in the commander's seat. Her head seemed to have slid to the side and was resting on her shoulder. The movement of the biomechanical panes had come to rest. It made her face seem almost organic again.

She is sleeping, Thora thought. *Infirm and deadly exhausted.* She shivered. *The commander weary of life... What a symbol of the Imperium.*

The condition of the ship came to Thora's attention with merciless barefacedness on the way to the hangar as she passed a corridor whose self-illuminating walls had gone out. A thread of faint red light streamed from the ceiling over the walls to the floor, then from the floor to the ceiling again. A repair robot was stranded there, scanning the corridor over and over with its photo sensors for some unknown reason.

"Why aren't you repairing the walls?" she reprimanded the machine.

"Profound material fatigue," it answered in a strange rhythm that made the words almost incomprehensible. The voice output was broken, and that was probably not the robot's only damage.

A defective repair robot, Thora thought. *Very encouraging.*

Carefully, with her back against the wall, she pushed past the machine. The entrance to the hangar was only a few decks below the level of the control center.

The hangar was significantly lower than the rooms where the

spherical spacecraft were located. Three reconnaissance ships sat side by side—flat, shapely disks each with a sphere of composite-reinforced glassite embedded in the centers. This transparent sphere housed the reconnaissance craft's pressurized air cabin. Pilot and co-pilot could sit side by side; behind them was a jump seat for one more person.

And there are three of us, Thora realized to her surprise.

One of the three all-too-young Arkonides stood by one of the reconnaissance ships; her hand stroked the metal of the body slowly and thoughtfully. Thora recognized her as Tamika.

Between two of the ships, another figure was crouching on the ground: Quiniu Soptor. Thora tried to figure out the half-Arkonide's posture. Apparently, Soptor had crossed her left leg over her right, and then squatted. Her arms were folded at the nape of her neck. How could she keep her balance on one leg like that?

Just then, the woman with the hair plumage straightened up in a smooth move, as effortlessly as if there were no gravity at all aboard the *Aetron*.

"We'd like to fly with you," Tamika explained. She gave Quiniu Soptor a quick glance. "Wouldn't you, chimera?"

"Yes," Soptor confirmed.

Thora pondered whether she should ask how the two knew about her plans. She wondered if they had been sent... Kemath's spies, perhaps? Or Suuloi's?

Absurd, she thought. But what absurdity was unthinkable on a ship like the *Aetron?* She examined herself to see if she'd get angry. But it didn't matter to her. She had nothing to hide.

"You don't even know where I'm headed," she said.

"To the planet-born," said Tamika with a glance at Soptor. The other woman seemed focused on an entirely different matter now, absorbed.

Thora realized that she herself hadn't even set a destination. "No," she replied, "I am not going to that planet. I want to look around the system."

"Why?" asked Tamika.

"You don't have to accompany me," the commander replied deprecatingly.

The other Arkonides remained silent. Tamika seemed a little intimidated. Soptor's face was expressionless, impossible for her to read, in any case.

"It could be dangerous," she explained to the two women. "You'll be safer aboard the *Aetron*."

Soptor laughed mockingly but didn't reply. Tamika looked at the half-Arkonide, seeking advice. Thora walked past Soptor and climbed a low ladder onto the reconnaissance ship's discus-like body.

The discus measured about sixteen meters, the cabin a little more than three meters. At intervals of ninety degrees, the metal body had spherical reinforcements where the freely adjustable propulsion units were housed.

Thora remembered the reconnaissance craft as being highly maneuverable, a vessel with great acceleration capacities. It had no offensive armaments, and its defensive shields were weak. Nothing to go into battle with. But more than enough to handle the sluggish technology of the planetarians.

The reconnaissance ship didn't have an airlock hatch. Thora resolved herself, touched a sensor button, and waited for the top half of the sphere to shift against the bottom half.

"If you want to fly with us, come on."

Quiniu Soptor followed her into the cabin, then Tamika joined them. Soptor sat down next to Thora without asking. Tamika took the jump seat behind the co-pilot.

“I’ll keep an eye on you, chimera,” she whispered to Quiniu Soptor, brushing her red plumage teasingly. Soptor bent her head forward, out of reach, and Tamika chuckled in amusement.

The commander wondered if she should change anything about the seating arrangements. She decided against it. She did, however, throw a glance over her shoulder. Tamika heeded the unspoken warning, leaning back and letting the pneumo seat’s safety clamps snap into place over her upper body.

The spherical shell closed. The propulsion units started up. The hangar doors slid open. With a light touch of the sensor button at the top of the steering stick, Thora activated the gravity neutralizer and lifted the reconnaissance ship onto the antigrav cushion. Then she pushed the stick slightly forward. The tiny spacecraft slid outside.

“Where are we going?” asked Tamika after several minutes of silence.

“This system has a total of three habitable or at least proto-habitable planets,” Thora explained. “Only the middle of these three worlds is actually inhabited with an evolved biosphere. The natives call it Terra. The planet closer to the sun is called Venus.”

“We are heading for the more remote one,” Quiniu Soptor observed. She must have gathered that from the navigation assistant’s monitor.

“Correct,” Thora confirmed. “The fourth satellite of this sun is Mars.”

The reconnaissance ship could accelerate at five hundred kilometers per second square. Thora had set the flying speed at thirty thousand kilometers per second—one third the speed of light. The tiny vessel didn’t possess a translight drive.

Mars was about 180 million kilometers away from Earth. The flight took them under two hours.

The three women didn't exchange a single word during that time. Thora steered the reconnaissance ship so that they couldn't see any of the surface in the light of the sun.

Mars showed itself in a dirty reddish brown. A system of rift valleys stretched like a massive scar south of the equator. The labyrinth of canyons stretched across over one fifth of the planet: four thousand kilometers long, fifty to two hundred kilometers wide, in some places up to ten thousand meters deep. Applied to earthly conditions, the gigantic canyon would have split the North American continent from the west coast to the east coast.

"A depression of the lithosphere?" asked Tamika, leaning forward between Thora's and Quiniu Soptor's shoulders.

"Possibly," Thora answered. "Simulation, please."

The *Aetron's* ship Positronic reacted some seconds later, presenting the most probable geophysical model of what might have happened on the planet millions of years ago. Through time-lapse, they saw molten rock rise from the depths and find ways out through volcanoes; how the entire region rose; how the surrounding crust stretched and finally cracked; how fissures and faultlines opened and stretched; how groundwater was released, with surface ice melting and washing away the walls of the rift valley; how the ground collapsed, its fragments swept away by the tide; how the water collected at one end of the canyon, forming a lake; how this itself aged and how the shore of the paleo lake, which was more than half a kilometer deep, broke at the exit of the canyon, leaving a chaotic terrain.

"There's not much left of these water masses," Tamika observed. "The planet's now just a dust corpse."

Thora visualized what they, the Arkonides, could have made of this place: how they would have bound the water, enriched the atmosphere, made the soil fertile, and populated it with microbes, fungi, plants, and animals.

Then she veered away.

“We are flying a little farther out,” she notified her companions.

“Besides Terra, there is a second planet in the habitable zone,” Tamika noted. She sounded eager, as if there were something to discover there.

Thora knew from the remote diagnoses the ship’s brain had made that this second planet (Venus, as the Terrans called it) was at this point also far from being habitable. Some moons of the gas giants seemed more promising to her. The biggest planet in the system stood about 620 million miles away on the other side of the sun. But she set course for the gas giant that was in the next orbit but one. It was characterized by a balanced ring system. The distance to the ringed planet was just over one billion kilometers.

“We’ll only do a remote diagnostic of the dominant planet!” she ordered.

She didn’t feel like turning back. She wanted to keep moving away from the moon where the wreck of her ship lay, away from the planet that overflowed with life like a festering wound. The planet to which Crest had gone, down into the domain of a makeshift technology that derived most of its energy from combustion and nuclear fission. A hellish planet where finding treatment was Crest’s disturbing dream.

The small on-board Positronic had analyzed the location data. The biggest planet enfolded a gigantic magnetosphere that spread out across the orbit of the ringed world. It had nearly one hundred bigger and smaller satellites, the innermost revolving moon dragging a gas hose behind it.

The Positronic explained, “The atmosphere contains an astonishingly high concentration of noble gases that require extremely low temperatures for their generation; at least lower than what would have prevailed during the formation phase of the other planets in this system.”

“That means?” asked Thora.

“The gas planet is probably older than the sun. It might have

formed outside the system and later migrated here. Or was deposited."

With the resources of the *Aetron's* astrophysics department, such questions could have been resolved within a matter of days. The *Aetron had* been on an astrophysical research expedition.

"All right," she said, "let's leave it at that."

Thora accelerated to half the speed of light, already pushing them well into the time-dilatory range, but she could put up with it. They would fly a little more than two hours proper time, then start slowing down.

The two younger Arkonides chattered about their experiences on board, mostly some erotic adventures that Tamika described and Quiniu Soptor commented on. They were anecdotes full of malice and astonishing nastiness. They talked with an ostentatious, almost challenging ingenuousness like old friends.

Thora let them be and looked out from the cockpit. The tracking data indicated that in the next few seconds they would pass through an asteroid belt. The structure was divided into three main belts with quite a few families. The Positronic made an extrapolation and estimated the number of objects at four hundred thousand, all of which added up to about five percent of the mass of Earth's moon.

Of course, Thora didn't get to see a single one of the rocks, and a moment later the belt was already behind them.

Shortly before she braked, Tanika said abruptly, "I think he's handsome." She blushed slightly. "Is it okay to say that?"

"I don't know who you're talking about," replied Thora. The ringed planet wasn't in sight yet; only its calculated image glowed pale in the holo.

"The planetarian with the dark hair," Tamika clarified.

That meant she had seen the recording as well. Apparently, the appearance of the two men on the ship had caused more of a stir than it had first seemed. Why did everybody think of the one with

the dark hair? Why not the stout one with the fire-colored hair? Who knew whether the distribution of roles in which the two had appeared at the center corresponded to a real balance of power and wasn't a staged game instead?

"You may say what you want," Thora responded coldly.

Tamika was silent for a few minutes. Then she said, "I didn't mean to invade your sphere of interest, Commander."

Thora bit her lower lip lightly. Was that a calculated insult or just an indiscretion of boundless simplicity? "The Planetariants are in no way in my sphere of interest," she said, bringing an end to the topic.

A short while later, she pulled the reconnaissance ship up a little, and the ringed planet emerged from the darkness. Thora had visited many star systems, seen many planets. Saturn was nice; nothing special, but a pleasant sight.

Since her eyes lacked any clues for estimating distances, the planet appeared to her as pale, low-contrast, ocher-colored, its atmosphere streaky. Its rings were composed of ice particles, the ice being pure in some regions and contaminated by dust in others. Plumes and eddies appeared in this maelstrom of hydrogen and helium, mixed with traces of ethane, methane, ethylene, and ammoniac. Summer in the South.

At the South Pole, white-blue auroras flared, ring-shaped light formations that contracted slowly and thus gained intensity. They watched for a while. On the night side of the planet they saw local turbulence converge into an avenue of storms; the electrical voltages discharged in flashes whose magnitude and violence would have been beyond the planetarians' imagination.

Thinking of him again... Thora scolded herself.

Another flash, branching and enigmatic like the hieroglyphics of a soulless civilization.

"Boring," grumbled Tamika. From the corner of her eye, Thora

saw the young woman reach out her arms, stretching and drumming a complicated rhythm on the cockpit's glassite with her knuckles. She yawned unabashedly.

It was a mistake to bring her along, Thora thought. *There are too many confidentialities that develop.* Or was it envy she felt toward Tamika, who could entirely dispense with the ceremonial airs that Arkonide society had impressed upon Thora herself?

She steered the reconnaissance ship in the direction of the planet's North Pole. It was winter there. The rings absorbed a significant portion of the light, covering the planet sometimes with gray, other times with black bands of shadow.

The globe seemed immense, but its substance wasn't very dense. On an ocean of water, it would float. There was no rock core. *A baseless world.*

"That's an interesting moon," Tamika commented. She pointed between Thora's and Soptor's shoulders at one of the many satellites in the hologram.

"The Terrans call it Titan," explained the Positronic.

Thora noted it crossly. What did it matter what the planetarians called this moon, which would remain out of reach for them for the foreseeable future, if not forever? She was tempted to give the satellite an Arkonide name but refrained. Instead, she steered the reconnaissance ship from its orbit around the northern hemisphere towards Titan.

"I have a request," Quiniu Soptor said.

Thora looked at her from the side. Slowly, Soptor turned her black face towards her. Something like a whiff brushed through the red feathers on her head, causing them to billow slightly. She raised her eyes with silvery irises and looked at the commander.

"Speak," Thora instructed.

"I want to fly myself."

“Have you ever flown before?” asked Thora.

“Yes.”

“In a virtuarium?”

“That too.”

She considered it for a moment, then said, “Good,” and handed over control command to the co-pilot.

The chimera, as Tamika called her, put her hand around the steering stick. Even here, her dark skin occasionally glimmered bluish.

Soptor mostly just kept the reconnaissance ship on course, carrying out only tiny maneuvers. After a couple of minutes, she could veer from their orbit around the moon. Titan was big—bigger than the planet that circled around the sun on the lowest orbit. Its atmosphere of methane and nitrogen was dense and ice-cold. The heavy gases lacked the thermal power necessary to escape the pull of gravity. Photochemical smog shrouded the satellite in a hazy veil. The tracker picked up radio waves emitted from the moon’s subterranean lakes.

“We’re going deeper,” Thora said.

“Into the atmosphere?” asked Soptor.

“Yes,” said Thora. “If you want, I’ll take over the controls again.”

Quiniu Soptor gripped the steering stick tighter and pushed it forward.

The reconnaissance ship dipped into the methane cloud.

Soptor lowered them deeper and deeper into the dense atmosphere. In its upper layers, the gas shell rotated faster than the moon itself. Every now and then, the small ship was caught by a gust and drifted sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right. Soptor intercepted the drift with increasing certainty.

Sixty kilometers above the ground, the wind abruptly disappeared. Gradually, the smoke-like veil gave way, revealing a view of the surface. Thora spotted the shores of a huge methane lake.

Soptor followed the course of a river for a while. Suddenly, they encountered torrential rain. Fist-sized drops of methane dashed against the cockpit's glassite and burst. Thora smelled a strange bittersweet aroma. She turned her head toward Quiniu Soptor. The chimera was steering with great concentration and seriousness—someone like Kemath would have long since let go of the steering stick, put his hands on the back of his neck, and watched as the Positronic autopilot took over.

Thora saw that the fine red feathers on the woman's head were secreting the finest droplets at their tips, a kind of dew that emitted the bittersweet scent as it evaporated.

"Is that you?" asked Tamika at that moment. She had smelled it as well.

Soptor didn't answer. They glided over a landscape full of ethane and methane lakes, then followed a rugged terrain, a large, dried-up lake. Thora looked at the data holo. Here, a few hundred meters above the ground, the humidity caused by the methane vapor was forty-five percent. The atmosphere was now so dense and the moon's gravity so low that if Thora had gotten out, she could have flown on muscle power alone.

Again, the landscape changed. They crossed an impact crater, then a volcanic structure, and finally a vast expanse of dunes whose crests rose up to three hundred meters.

"Are you receiving biogenic data?" Tamika asked the Positronic. "Hm, maybe some bacteria, bacterial colonies, simple worms, or something like that." She laughed. "So, the system doesn't belong to the Rhodan beings alone."

"What do you like about that?" Quiniu wanted to know.

"We could negotiate with them and buy the system from them,"

she said. “Another pearl in the tiara of the Great Imperium. More worlds that the regent won’t let out of his all-caring eyes.”

“The all-caring eyes…” Quiniu echoed in a tight voice.

“No slander, chimera,” warned Tamika with a dark voice. “I recently felt it on my own body how the look of the all-caring eyes rested on me. Where was that again? Right…I was standing under the servoshower and—”

“Shut up!” ordered Thora, lifting her hand. “There’s something there.”

Soptor slowed down and stopped the ship. Thora pointed at the holo. The image showed a three-dimensional model of the moon. Beneath the visible surface of methane hydrate and ice, harder than granite, some eighty kilometers thick, stretched an extensive saltwater ocean whose temperature rose towards the bottom. Radioactive nucleotides from the silicate core warmed it.

The water there remained at minus twenty degrees, but liquid. This was due on one hand to the enormous pressure and on the other hand to the rich occurrence of ammoniac, which acted as a natural antifreeze. In the abyssal depths of the subterranean ocean, or rather, in its holographic model, a faint reddish light was pulsating.

“What does that mean?” Soptor asked.

“Down there, energy is being produced artificially,” Thora explained. “It’s very weak. Like emergency electricity or the energy in machines that have been run down to the lowest level of operation.”

“What kind of machines?” asked Tamika. “Built by who?”

“Possibly by your presumptive moon inhabitants from whom you wanted to buy the system,” mocked Thora. “But the argument against that is that this energy has a signature that we wouldn’t necessarily have expected here.”

“Namely?” asked Quiniu Soptor. “Methane Breather?”

“No.” Thora glanced at the data monitor. “It resembles an Arkonide signature, albeit one that hasn’t been in use for over ten thousand years.”

“We are far outside imperial territories and interest spheres,” Tamika remarked. “Nothing but a coincidental similarity.”

“Possibly.”

“Shouldn’t we check? That would be consistent with fleet log, anyway.”

“Sure,” Thora agreed. “We should. And we will. But not with this ship. We have no offensive weapons systems on board. How could we melt or penetrate the ice crust? We’ll return in due course with one of our larger crafts and dive down into the ocean. Or send some robots that can work their way into the depths.”

“We could try to make radio contact,” suggested Tamika.

A good idea. Thora herself wasn’t sure why she shied away from it. After all, there was much to suggest there was an ancestral facility down there, not an enemy. Maybe a depot, a safe room for shipwrecked space soldiers, constructed in the times of the Methane Wars, in the context of some strategic galactic considerations. Perhaps there was even sufficient equipment, material, and know-how to make the *Aetron* capable of translight flight again.

Thora would store that hope away somewhere in her mind—a small, emotional deposit. “We could try to call up the source of the energy. But we would be taking a risk we can’t calculate. As I said, it’s a long outdated signature. We can’t exclude the possibility that it will consider our signatures illegitimate or that it will judge them to be forgeries and react to our attempt to contact it as if under attack. You know that our shield is not very strong.”

Tamika and Quiniu nodded.

“So let’s be careful,” she continued. “Our situation is dire enough.” She was tempted to add, *Of course, there are surely enough*

crew members on board who'd be happy if I was kept out of it. But why let the younger women in on her worries?

Thora looked at Quiniu and then briefly glanced back at Tamika. She noticed a certain tension in both of them. *Good*, she thought. There was definitely a reason to be alert. The two of them, after all, had caught on. Perhaps she'd be able to train Tamika and Quiniu Soptor to be the core of a newly arranged crew with a whole different hierarchical structure.

A few minutes after they had regained their cruising speed, Quiniu said, "Would you allow me to fly alone, Commander?"

"That's what you're doing, Soptor."

Thora heard her laugh for the first time. It was a soft, thoughtful laugh with a mildly mocking undertone. Thora wondered if the other woman was in high spirits. But if so, were high spirits not a kind of bravery as well? When was the last time one of the crew members had asked to do something by themselves? Why shouldn't she let the chimera have a micro spacecraft? Because Kemath would reprimand her?

Considered closely, this idea exerted a certain appeal. Yes, she wanted to give Kemath a reason to reprimand her. Besides, she could check out the situation aboard the *Aetron* unobtrusively this way.

She called the ship. Suuloi answered after a few moments. Her voice sounded like an acoustic mosaic assembled incorrectly. "Commander?"

"I want the ship's brain to send another reconnaissance ship to us."

She had worked out a couple of arguments for why she should want that, but the old woman said only, "The order has been passed on. The reconnaissance ship will be activated. Should the autopilot steer it or will you do it via telenavigation?"

"Have the autopilot fly it over."

“The others are coming back?”

Thora glanced at Quiniu. A hint of disappointment had entered her face. “No,” she said, “There’s one planet we’re still looking at. The second one.”

“Venus,” Suuloi confirmed. The biomechanical panes on her face shifted into a smile. “That’s what the planetarians call it, at least.”

It’s always too bad about life

The changeover maneuver was surprisingly effortless. The autopilot of their own reconnaissance ship took over the other by remote control. They flew head over head. Thora and her companions closed the space helmet, the breathable air was pumped out, and both cockpits opened. With a half somersault, Soptor covered the few meters from one open cockpit to the other. She landed in the pilot’s pneumo as precisely as if she had done nothing but jump from ship to ship in space for years.

Maybe it didn’t strike her that we’re moving at a hundred and fifty thousand kilometers per second right now, Thora mused. *Or maybe that’s exactly what she enjoyed... The feeling of being absolved, being discharged of everything, if only for a moment, of being entirely on the move. Then she’d be*—Thora suddenly realized—*just like me.*

They approached Venus. The planet lay just outside the system’s habitable zone. Thora read off the data and briefly converted the Arkonide units to Terran measurements: the moonless planet required little more than 224 of the days that defined Terra for one orbit around the sun.

Maybe, she thought in an unexpected fit of confidence, her discovery on the Saturnian moon would prove to be helpful, and they would succeed in putting the *Aetron* back into service and continuing their search after all. She could clearly picture the ship rising from the Moon, and how the satellite and its planet, that insignificant world, hopelessly divided in questions of politics,

morals, religion, economy, ecology, and probably also art and health care, would sink into the depths of space like a woozy dream into oblivion. She'd soon forget its name as well as the name of the astronaut Rhodan.

Then this system could go into her on-board archive as yet another failure. She'd push forward to another one, look, find nothing, and accelerate again. And on and on just like that.

To her slight amazement, she realized that she didn't believe any of that in the slightest. Of course the search couldn't go on forever. And if it did, it wouldn't be them conducting it, Thora and Crest. Crest would be the first to die. What about her? Would she return to Arkon?

Yes. Or would she? What for? Would she continue the search by herself? Age, grow old, die during her mission, gradually abandoned by the crew? Would the *Aetron* merely rush from system to system in the end, alone and stripped of all life?

"Hm," said Tamika, "a tragic world, isn't it?"

Thora nodded. Together they looked at the model, where the on-board Positronic gave an outline of the planet's geophysical history. They saw early Venus. A little over four billion years ago, it lay viable in the light of the sun. Back then, however, it didn't shine at its current intensity.

Thora read off the numbers: the system's early sun had produced only three quarters of its present luminosity. Water ran on Venus. A wind combed the oceans. It was warm, but the temperatures stayed well below 212 degrees. The continental plates drifted, lubricated by the water. Currents in the planet's iron core built up a magnetic field, a shield against the solar wind.

It was possible that life had developed and evolved in the oceans of Venus at the same time as life on Earth; perhaps earlier. This life had a period of a few hundred million years. But gradually, and over countless centuries, the sun gained power. It became hot on Venus. The tidal forces of the nearby star pulled at it; the frictional processes between core and mantle slowed it down; moonless and

without an anchor in space, its axis swayed chaotically as on a tumbling top. The plates on the surface came to a standstill. Finally, the planet began to rotate backwards. The sun rose in the west. The solidified ground plates became more and more massive, heavier and heavier. The heat, constantly generated by radioactive decay in the interior, accumulated and heated the rock. Finally, about half a billion years ago, it had forced its way out.

When plate tectonics stopped, the planet's magnet field went out. On the holo it appeared similar to the dissolution of an energy dome. Venus was left defenseless against the solar winds. More and more water evaporated into space. The heat continued to rise. Five hundred degrees, six hundred, seven hundred. A critical value: at more than seven hundred degrees, water couldn't remain liquid, no matter what sort of pressure was applied to it. The oceans were running out, evaporating.

"Well," Tamika stated, "too bad about life, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Thora. It was always too bad about life.

Quiniu Soptor got in touch. She didn't use the hypercom; that wasn't necessary at such a short distance. "This planet is very bright," she commented.

"Its cloud cover is bright," corrected Thora.

"Are we diving in?" Soptor was apparently eager to independently repeat the maneuver she had executed on Titan under Thora's supervision.

Thora wasn't quite as comfortable with the thought, but she couldn't find an argument against it.

"Of course we're diving in," she answered. "Nobody has been here. Even in the most favorable scenario it'll take the planetarians decades before their technology will allow them to land on this world. So let's indulge in the pleasure of being the first."

She was herself amazed by her sudden cheerfulness. It tasted hollow. Tamika didn't seem to notice. She licked her lips with

excitement.

“We’re diving in,” Quiniu Soptor repeated. Then she cut the connection. Thora was fine with that. The young pilot had to concentrate.

They passed through a cloud layer with a thickness of more than twenty kilometers. For the second time during their excursion, the reconnaissance ships encountered rain. This time it consisted of sulfuric acid. It wouldn’t reach the ground; the acid would evaporate on the way. The wind was blowing at almost four hundred kilometers per hour. Near the ground, there’d be no wind; the atmosphere was too dense.

The surface of the planet became visible. It glowed a dark red; Thora could barely make out formations or details. Of the sunlight that shone on Venus, only two percent reached the ground.

The terrain was dominated by plains, over which ran endless, slow, stony waves. Thora glanced upwards. The disc of the other reconnaissance ship was flying high above her.

The two crafts reached the equatorial region. Below them stretched a plateau. The mountains here reached heights of more than a thousand meters. The rocky landscape resembled folded mountains, but the crust of Venus was young, about five hundred million years old. What could have folded up these mountains? Plate tectonics had long since calmed. Was there perhaps a giant volcano beneath the plateau that had caused the land above it to arch up?

Thora activated the residual light amplifier in the glassite. Now she could see a kind of parquet, parallel faults that intersected at right angles. The stone parquets rose like islands from the deeper lands. The surface was strewn with volcanoes. They formed entire fields with hundreds of cones and domes.

Thora pondered whether they should land. Land and get out. Near the ground, the outside temperature was 860 degrees. That was enough to make lead melt. The surface of this planet was the

hottest in the solar system. The atmospheric pressure was equivalent to water pressure at a depth of nine hundred meters. Her protective suit would be able to handle it.

"Attention! This is an emergency call," sounded a voice from the loudspeaker.

It took Thora a split second to realize who was speaking. It was the voice the *Aetron's* ship Positronic spoke with. She pulled up the small craft and accelerated, hoping that Soptor would follow her without further orders. On reflex, she activated the defensive shield and continued to accelerate.

A blow hit the reconnaissance ship. An irrepressible power turned the flight disc on its side. Thora tried to regain control, but the steering reacted first tenaciously, then jerkily.

"Autopilot!" she shouted. Nothing happened. The engines hummed, getting louder and louder. Then the noise broke off. Suddenly it was so quiet that Thora could hear the blood rushing in her ears. For an unreal moment, the ship stood still in the air.

Then it fell.

"We are going down," said Tamika with unnatural calm. Did she think this was all a game, a new scenario in a virtuarium?

Thora bent the steering stick back and forth, back and forth. "Yes," she said.

She let go and leaned back. The safety clamps on her seat tightened. With a soft whisper, the pneumo cushion inflated. She expected to hear Soptor's voice from the acoustic fields, a fear-filled hypercom call that would give away the second ship's position and expose it to defensive fire. But everything remained calm. Maybe against all odds, Quiniu Soptor had reacted correctly and pulled her ship up, sideways, out of the atmosphere, out of reach of the unknown gunfire.

I shouldn't have activated the shield, Thora realized. *That must have been mistaken as an attack. Or as preparation for one.*

Tamika’s hand closed around her wrist and squeezed. She felt the urge to close her eyes, but she withstood the desire and stared into the darkness into which they were now falling, unrestrained.

Part 2

Reginald Bull

July 4-8, 2036

Talks about Saints, Arkonides, and other Sky Riders

Rhodan had left the *Stardust* and gone into one of the buildings that had been erected by the Arkonide robots. The structure was as white as snow, and it seemed as if someone had dumped a large block of ice, over forty meters long, into the desert, partly melted and deformed by the heat. All the brims and edges had liquefied and turned into soft curvatures; the cuboid looked as gently curved as a glacier. No floor or decks could be seen from the outside; the front was altogether a milky white color, which seemed partly cloudy, partly clear, and occasionally a slightly blue opalescent.

Inside, it was surprisingly cool without being cold. Rhodan stood in the as yet unconstructed hall and wondered what was actually supporting the ceiling. He didn't see any pillars or struts.

Presumably the material itself, then.

Below the building, the robots had installed a three-level basement, each floor about four meters high. The rooms seemed to be well insulated. On the lowest floor, only a distant murmur was audible from the noise; as Crest had assured him, the robots were working in his favor.

How would Crest have known that? Rhodan reflected. And on what was his, Rhodan's, trust in these Arkonides based? What if the strangers' humanoid bodies were only a mask? If behind that mask lurked black lizards whose grotesque sense of humor allowed them to play games with the humans? What if Crest had brought him to heel with an invisible weapon and he, Rhodan, was acting as a puppet of this stranger, implanting Arkonides on Earth like a disease?

He sighed. What if the noise was gradually making him paranoid and he was seeing ghosts rising from the pulp fiction novels of his youth? What if he hadn't actually been launched to the Moon but was lying in a matrix into which Flight Director Pounder had ordered him, to test how he would react to such an event?

Unfortunately, you failed, boy. We'll let Nyssen, Freyt, Doc McAllistair, and Deringhouse take care of this. You'd better stay on Earth as a copy boy or something.

Rhodan sensed a light vibration in the ground. Bull had launched the *Stardust.*

He went down the stairs to one of the underground floors. The Chinese general would wonder who had been aboard the starship. Rhodan was in no hurry to give him the answer.

He slept, but only briefly, yet woke feeling refreshed, almost burning for action. He felt as if he'd had an inspiring conversation in his sleep—his dream—but couldn't remember with whom or about what. He summoned one of the robots in charge of erecting the buildings.

"What can I do for you?" the machine asked.

Yes, what? Hadn't he just had an idea?

Rhodan reflected. He knew that the Chinese were boring tunnels towards the area protected by the energy dome. He smiled.

"We'll build a tunnel as well," he said.

"In what direction?"

Again, he reflected. Then, on an impulse, he pointed in the direction of the lake. Water could eventually become a problem.

"There," he instructed.

The machine registered his gesture and converted it into a construction plan. "When should I begin?"

“Right away,” Rhodan said. He grinned. *From sky rider to mole,* he thought. *Some career...*

“What if his strength doesn’t reach all the way here?” Darya Morozova asked.

For Alexander Baturin, the entire conversation couldn’t have been more absurd. He had long forgotten that he had told her about his brother. About Ivan, who lived as a monk near the Baikonur Cosmodrome at the Monastery of St. John Lestvichnik, the heavenly patron saint of cosmonauts.

A few hours after the destruction of the Arkonide starship by something resembling a nuclear explosion, his companion had started talking about Ivan, about the monastery, and about the remains of St. Sergius of Radonezh, which were, at least in part, on board the ISS and had thus found their almost heavenly rest.

Darya’s ramblings were nothing but satire—cheerful, almost exuberant. She steered the Lunamobile this way and that. The mobile’s wings were spread wide, but the sun had almost set and wouldn’t feed the solar cells for much longer.

Still, Baturin hadn’t objected to the trip. It wasn’t electricity that was the vehicle’s problem, but oxygen. The compressed air in the cabin would keep them alive for another four hours, then they’d have to resort to using the oxygen in their suits just to gain another three hours of life.

The final limit.

The Arkonides had destroyed Armstrong Base, the U.S. Moon base. Now their own spaceship had been demolished.

The Moon is gradually becoming a mass grave, Baturin thought.

“I never said that St. John would provide us with oxygen,” he defended himself. “And how would he get here from the ISS? Even the most venerable skeletons don’t have rocket propulsion.”

“On a winged horse?” asked Darya Morozova. “I don’t know how

saints usually travel."

There was a slight crackle on the radio's receiver. Then they heard a voice speaking English. Baturin recognized Conrad Deringhouse.

The American astronaut asked, "Do you actually have a particular destination or are you just going for a ride?"

"It's a pilgrimage," replied Morozova, "to the legendary holy wells of lunar oxygen."

"Oxygen deprivation," they heard Rod Nyssen's voice. "Familiar symptoms. Hallucinations, unfounded euphoria, and so on."

Nonsense, Baturin thought.

"Baturin, what's the matter with you?" Nyssen asked. "Are you still alive?"

"Sorry, I'm not," he replied.

"That quitter," Nyssen scoffed.

"Do you have a better idea than just driving around?" asked Morozova. "To the local 'Makdonalda,' maybe?"

"Kentucky Fried Chicken," suggested Nyssen. "I'll invite you."

"Blintz! My first date. Do I have to dress up?" She braked and stopped the Lunamobile.

"If you ask me, you don't have to wear anything," Nyssen commented. "No false shame. It's comfortably warm. You'd just have to hold your breath."

"I'll have to do that soon anyway," Morozova replied.

Baturin automatically glanced at the temperature gauge. Nyssen was right; it was pleasantly warm. In the sunlight, the temperature had still been over 200 degrees. Now it had dropped to 130 degrees. Soon, over the course of the fourteen-day "lunar night," it

would drop to minus 250 degrees.

The Lunamobile with the two Americans came to a halt next to them. They could look into each other's cabins from where they sat. They nodded briefly to each other and fell silent.

The last four humans on the Moon, thought Baturin. No Russian, American, or Chinese spacecraft would be able to reach them in time. Besides, neither Russia nor the United States would spend several hundred million rubles or dollars just to pick up a couple of corpses. Theirs and the bodies that he, Morozova, and Gleb Yakunin had discovered at Armstrong Base. No Congress, no parliament, no tsar would authorize such resources for that endeavor. That was if their space agencies even believed there were survivors in the first place.

Baturin was convinced the American astronaut Michael Freyt was responsible for the destruction of the Arkonide vessel. Indeed, his American companions denied knowing or even suspecting anything about a bomb. But any other explanation seemed absurd to him. Of course, he assumed the ship, which was more voluminous than any solidly founded mega structure on Earth, was capable of destroying itself. But why? Had the Arkonides really seen the danger their ship could be in if captured by two—*two!*—humans?

On Earth, the *Stardust* had resisted the Chinese bombardment with a comparatively small Arkonide device that placed an energy shield around the ship. Wasn't it reasonable to assume that the giant craft had defenses that were insurmountable even if faced with all the military might of Earth?

The Americans, there could be no reasonable doubt, must have fallen for the same strategy as the Russian military: smuggle a nuclear explosive device *onto* the ship. So the logical conclusion was that Freyt had detonated his own bomb.

In any case, Gleb hadn't. Because it wasn't Gleb who had transported the Russians' bomb. Gleb hadn't known they were on a mission from which no return was planned, nor had Morozova known anything about it either.

Those responsible had instructed only the one responsible for transporting the bomb to the ship. Only him: Alexander Baturin.

They waited there for just under two hours. The conversation eventually died down, although neither the Americans nor the Russians had broken the connection. The radios transmitted only their silence.

Baturin tried to focus on something—childhood memories, his first love, anything. But all thoughts escaped him, as if his consciousness had taken flight.

He wouldn't suffocate. At least, he wasn't afraid of that. He considered whether he wanted to leave Morozova and the two Americans the choice or whether he should take them with him, without asking, into the silent fireball of a nuclear chain reaction that would spread faster than the pain in their nerve cells could register.

Perhaps no human on Earth would see the explosion immediately. But a few satellites would witness it, and they'd transmit images to control centers somewhere in Russia and America, in India and China. There, it would be decided whether the public would be informed of the incident or not.

And as always, even with the strictest secrecy prescribed, the truth would eventually surface. Because the truth was like rust: in the end, it ate through all the vaults.

In this way, Baturin remained lost in his thoughts, Morozova in hers. They didn't notice the spaceship above them until later. Since there was no sun, it cast no shadow. It glided across the stars like a silhouette, a black delta.

Baturin watched the apparition. There was something hypnotic, phantasmal, about its way of flying, as if it had burst out of a dream and was now on its maiden voyage through reality.

"Bozhe moy," Morozova said. "Oh my God!"

“Did you see that too?” Conrad Deringhouse asked over the radio a few breaths later.

“Yes,” said Baturin. He didn’t even make an effort to filter the astonishment from his voice. “We didn’t know the *Stardust* had a second sister ship.”

They heard the two Americans burst out laughing.

“Oh yes,” crowed Nyssen. “An entire fleet: the *Starlight,* the *Starchild*, the *Starshit,* the *Kentucky Starred Chicken*—hundreds of them! Our Chinese sponsors don’t seem to know what to do with their yuan. They donated a couple trillion to us and said, ‘Guys, build starships with it!’”

“That was no sister ship,” Deringhouse explained. “It was the *Stardust* herself.”

Baturin thought he could almost hear him grin.

“Rhodan’s here.”

For some minutes, they discussed what to do. Every now and then, Baturin and Darya switched to Russian, although they didn’t have anything to say that needed to be kept from the two Americans.

Strangely enough, they were all united in their expectation that Rhodan would rescue them. The only question was whether they should stay put or travel to meet him. They had no doubt that the *Stardust* would fly them to the wreck of the Arkonide ship. They only wondered if the craft could land directly in the crater.

“Didn’t you see how it flew?” Deringhouse asked. “No ship from Earth flies like that. It’s probably been retrofitted with Arkonide technology.”

“Then it should be able to land,” Baturin replied.

Morozova laughed. “Didn’t you see the images of the Arkonide wreck? Landing doesn’t seem to be their field of excellence.”

They finally decided to follow the *Stardust.* The Lunamobiles turned around. A short while later, they were rolling back towards the crater at over fifty kilometers per hour. That was well below the speed limit, but the arrival of the Earth craft was too great a gift to jeopardize with a driving mistake.

It took them two hours. The electric motors of the Lunamobiles would remain operational for another hour or two. The compressed air cabins were still working, and they wanted to take in that air until their last breath. But he and Morozova held themselves ready to switch to the oxygen supply of their spacesuits immediately. It wouldn't be much different for the Americans.

Baturin and Deringhouse stopped the vehicles on the ridge. Below them lay a wasteland of debris, and at the edge of that wasteland stood the *Stardust.*

Baturin shut down the drive and got ready to exit.

"What are you going to do?" asked Morozova. "Have you forgotten how high the radioactivity is out there?"

"Yes. Totally," Baturin said, and opened the door. "Come or stay."

I'm staying. At least, I want to know what we are getting into."

Baturin hesitated, then closed the door again. "Fine. We still have a few minutes of air left."

The two Americans stayed in their vehicle as well.

Baturin found the binoculars, raised them to his helmet visor, and adapted them. Closely examined, the destruction of the ship appeared even more complete. Steel plates lay shattered, twisted, and tangled. It was no longer possible to tell if they had been parts of the hull, floor, or wall before the explosion, or even the cover of some machine.

"What do you see?" asked Morozova.

“The same as you,” he replied. “Nothing.”

It was only after a few minutes that Baturin detected movement in the wasteland.

“Rhodan and two machines,” he informed Morozova. “Robots that seem to be entirely intact.”

“He brought them here on the *Stardust.*”

“Yes.” The purpose of the American’s trip was evident: Rhodan and the machines wanted to cull usable high-tech gear from the debris.

Baturin didn’t know whether to admire or pity Rhodan. He assumed, however, that the latter hadn’t placed himself in any danger. What he was wearing down there was not a terrestrial spacesuit like their own outfits, which offered little to no resistance to nuclear radiation. The suit he was working in reminded Baturin of a sports tank, the kind American football players put on for a match. Visible patches seemed to enlarge the upper part of the body. For a while it even looked as if Rhodan was working without head protection. Then Baturin realized that he was wearing a transparent helmet.

“That’s an Arkonide protective suit,” he told his companion.

“Lucky for him the aliens aren’t nine-armed squids. Or star sirens without abdomens. Will you please give me the binoculars?”

“Just a moment.” Baturin laughed. “Surprise. Rhodan isn’t Rhodan.”

“What?”

He handed Morozova the binoculars. She looked through and adjusted them.

“Blintz!” she cried. “That’s Reginald Bull.”

Baturin wondered if they should try to contact him. Perhaps their American colleagues had already done so on a different

frequency.

That was when Bull noticed them. He stood still for a moment, then let go of the debris and walked towards them. His movements were strange. They seemed terrestrial, not the way people normally moved in the weak gravity of the Moon, with floating, delayed strides as if moving through crystal-clear jelly. Bull walked confidently, purposefully, and fast, as if he had assured himself of Earth's gravity.

It took him less than ten minutes to reach the ridge.

"Is he armed?" Morozova asked.

"You have the binoculars. You tell me."

"I don't see a weapon. What's he planning?"

"He's coming because he wants to have a hand in it personally," Baturin answered. "He's going to rock the Lunamobile and tip it over. Then we're screwed."

Bull, of course, had something else in mind.

He knocked on the window.

The five of them stood between the Lunamobiles. Baturin noticed with a slight sense of triumph that Bull hadn't sided with the American astronauts but kept the same distance from both parties.

"Are you responsible for this?" the newcomer asked, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder towards the wreckage.

"Hello, Reginald," said Deringhouse.

"Hello, Bully," added Nyssen.

"Don't call me *Bully*," the other replied quietly. "What the hell?"

"Sorry. I forgot you don't like that. By the way, Michael Freyt is dead, in case you're interested. He died in the giant ship. As did one

of the Russians."

"Gleb Yakunin," Baturin clarified. He introduced himself and Morozova.

"Michael and her colleague, Yakunin," Bull said in a tone Baturin couldn't identify. "There were more people on board."

"Not that I know of," Nyssen answered.

"Well, what do you know," said Bull. "There were more people on board. They call themselves Arkonides. I don't even know how many. A hundred, maybe ten thousand. There are no survivors. Therefore, once again: are you responsible for this?"

"Mr. Bull," Morozova interjected, "is this going to be an interrogation? I'm about to suffocate, sir. Can we maybe talk about if and how you might prevent that? Or did you only come up the hill to investigate us and then sentence us to death?"

"I'm not judging anybody," Bull replied. "And I'm not executing anyone."

"To answer your question briefly, Mr. Bull," Morozova offered, "aboard the Russian ship, there was no bomb. Gleb didn't have such a thing nor am I wearing an explosive belt. If you are after a body search, go ahead." She stretched out both arms. "And if you suspect Baturin, his brother is a monk in a monastery at the Baikonur Cosmodrome. He's under the personal protection of St. John Lestvichnik and needs no further defense or arms."

Baturin rolled his eyes. For a moment, it was silent in their receivers. Then Bull burst out laughing.

"Along with St. John, we'd already be six."

"There is enough room for all of us inside the *Stardust*," Deringhouse stated.

"It's a little more cramped in there than you remember," Bull informed him. "We've made some modifications."

“Really?” asked Nyssen. “Of what kind?”

“Of a mysterious kind.”

“I don’t want to push you, Mr. Bull,” Morozova said, “but I’d like to know if I may survive.”

Without a word, Bull turned around and started walking. Baturin reflected upon what would happen if Deringhouse and Nyssen suddenly drew guns from hidden pockets of their suits and fired at him. Would they stand a chance against the Arkonide protective suit? Was Bull perhaps trying to provoke such an attack, if only to demonstrate the powerlessness of terrestrial technology? Would the machines that had brought him back to the Moon detect an assault and respond with a fiery blast of superior guns?

None of those things happened.

“Wait,” Bull’s voice sounded through the helmet loudspeakers.

“For what?” Nyssen asked.

“I have some business to take care of,” he told them. “Wait until that’s done. Nobody’s going to die. I’m taking you with me on board the *Stardust*.”

“Reginald,” said Deringhouse, “the *Stardust* belongs to the United States, not to you. I hereby remove you from command.”

They heard Bull laugh. “Go ahead and depose me. But let me do my work.”

“Exploit the Arkonide wreck?” asked Nyssen.

“Of course.”

“It doesn’t belong to you.”

“Well, unless you produce a deed of gift, it belongs neither to you nor to our Mr. President nor to the tsar.”

“It doesn’t belong to you,” Nyssen repeated.

Bull grumbled, “If it belongs to anyone at all, it’s to the Arkonides. And I am collaborating with the last surviving Arkonide in the solar system.”

“Where’s the woman who committed the massacre in the Gobi?” asked Deringhouse. “Is she not with you?”

“That’s none of your business, but no, she’s not with Rhodan.”

“Too bad,” Nyssen jeered. “That would have made a nice couple: Bonnie and Clyde à la *Star Wars*. And you as Master Yoda.”

Bull laughed grimly. “I wouldn’t have thought you were that educated.” In the meantime, he had reached the wasteland of debris.

“Can we help you in any way, Mr. Bull?” Baturin asked. “With anything?”

“No. The radiation levels down here are too high. Stay where you are, or better yet, duck behind the ridge.”

“If you’re that concerned about us,” Nyssen interjected again, “let us get onto the *Stardust* already. We’d be safe there.”

“And we’d have enough oxygen, wouldn’t we?” asked Morozova.

“Yes,” Bull confirmed.

Apart from that, he didn’t react to Nyssen’s request. He worked for a little longer than an hour, picking up anything that seemed usable to him with the help of the robots. Sometimes Baturin had the impression the machines were advising him, but he wasn’t sure. If Bull was communicating with them, it was at a frequency not accessible to Baturin or the others.

Flotsam of the Stars. Baturin drafted a headline for an upcoming imaginary newspaper photo. He had learned American English through National Geographic, and that had been during a time when the Mandarin and Hindi teachers at his school had joked that English was a dying language.

Bull and the robots transported their findings into the *Stardust*.

The utopian farmer brings in the harvest from his mechanical field. That could be the caption under the press photo.

They finally heard Bull's voice over the helmet speakers again. He sounded less enthused, more annoyed. Perhaps he had found nowhere near what he had hoped for.

"Come on, now. Hurry. Don't stay at ground zero any longer than necessary."

And off they went.

Inside the spaceship, the robots positioned themselves so that they were at the back of Baturin, Morozova, Deringhouse, and Nyssen, like police at the ready. Baturin knew the cockpit had been designed for four astronauts. However, they found five formchairs instead. The arrangement seemed improvised and tight, and the robots didn't make it feel any roomier. Bull did not grant them a look at the payload bay.

Four of the formchairs seemed familiar and similar to each other, probably from the same series—Baturin knew similar fitments from Russian starships. But the fifth chair, where Bull settled himself, seemed out of place in its fragile elegance. It appeared to be made from one piece, perhaps even cast.

Baturin and Morozova exchanged a brief glance. The Americans had also taken notice.

"Interesting furniture," Nyssen commented. "Bad back?"

"Not just that," Bull said, ostentatiously massaging his neck with one hand. "When you get to be my age, you learn to appreciate modest comforts."

From the cockpit, they had been able to briefly glance into the multipurpose room farther back, which must have originally served as a kitchen, restroom, and gym, as well as a place to sleep. Bull and the robots were using it for extra cargo space.

To Baturin, the hodgepodge seemed like a cabinet of curiosities full of futuristic technical fantasies. However, he felt more comfortable once Bull pushed a button to close the door. The devices and fragments would have to be thoroughly decontaminated before humans could explore and eventually operate them. It was surprising that so many machines had survived the nuclear explosion.

The *Stardust's* original space drives sat in the stern. Bull didn't specify what sort of modifications had been made to it; they merely learned that the flight back to Earth would take only a matter of hours.

The thrust was correspondingly breathtaking, even for seasoned cosmonauts like Baturin.

Darya Morozova exclaimed, "Bozhe moy!" which, Baturin gathered, was not so much directed at the creator of the universe as it was the *Stardust's* acceleration levels. She seemed to enjoy the flight. Eventually, she tilted her head, until it was almost resting on his shoulder, and said in Russian, "Some of those magic boxes for us, and the tsar would kiss our feet."

"Something I've always dreamed of," he teased back.

Morozova stretched her neck and threw a demonstrative glance at Baturin's shoes. "Hm," she said, and grinned, "it would be worth a try."

He wondered where her sudden confidentiality, her high spirits had come from.

"Mr. Bull, are you going to drop us off in Russia?" he asked.

The pilot seemed genuinely perplexed. "How? With a stopover in the Red Square?" He shook his head. "You'll have no trouble getting back to Moscow from our base in the Gobi. Our Chinese hosts are very sociable."

He grinned broadly. With his close-cropped red hair and his light, almost ocean-blue eyes, Baturin could easily imagine him at

the counter of an Irish bar, a glass of Guinness in his hand. He was short, surely measuring less than 1.7 meters. Baturin tried to imagine that the strange, futuristic breastplate, the alien armor, wasn't there. Possibly Bull looked a little corpulent even without the outfit on.

Deringhouse, perhaps ten years younger, was a head taller than him. Nyssen, on the other hand, was even shorter than Bull but seemed self-assured, almost aggressive. Baturin couldn't estimate his age.

Finally, he cast a sidelong glance at Morozova. She and he were not exactly what one would call a well-rehearsed team. This trip to the Moon was only their second mission together. He knew little about her. She wasn't married. With her high cheekbones, her straight black hair that lay around her like a bonnet, and her dark eyes, she was rather attractive, but at 1.78 meters, she was too tall for him.

What had brought him to such thoughts? Before Morozova could notice his glance, he closed his eyes.

Shortly afterwards, she addressed him. "Silent dialogue with St. Sergius of Radonezh?"

He kept his eyes closed. "No contact yet," he said. "It's possible we are passing the ISS at too great a distance."

The Earth was certainly big. It looked fragile, like a globe mouth-blown by the Lord's angels and afterwards painted with water and rocks, clouds and life.

Soon, he would have to decide. They hadn't suffocated. They wouldn't suffocate. If nothing happened, they would land in the Gobi Desert. They'd probably face Perry Rhodan, and they might even meet an Arkonide. They'd stand idly by as Bull and the robots unloaded the gadgetry of a technology that was decades ahead of all human knowledge and skill.

The tsar had predicted all this for him. Alisher Wekselberg had welcomed him twice, once officially and in the presence of their

senior officers, the second time privately, alone in his Blue Kremlin on the artificial mountain near Skolkovo. Baturin had feared he would be enjoying lavish feasts, pampered with Crimean champagne and jelly of eel and other disgusting things.

Instead, tThere had only been a single bottle of Perrier for the two of them, green and cool. Unlike most of the old aristocrats, the tsar kept no white tigers, no crocodiles, not even dogs. However, he did wear one of those stylish one-piece suits of English cloth, with a white sleeveless vest over it.

There, he had clarified the goal of the mission to Baturin:

“You must assess for yourself if there is a realistic chance of taking over the Arkonide technology. We’ll pay what we can. We’ll lay the world at the Arkonides’ feet. We’ll give them land, air to breathe, rescue from their wreck. We’ll build them a city. But they will have to accept our sovereignty.”

“They won’t,” Baturin replied.

“No,” said the Tsar, “they won’t. So, what are we going to do instead, Michael Sergeyevich?”

Baturin shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve already put everything behind me.”

The tsar examined him. “A terrible thing. Please excuse me, I don’t know what horrible nonsense I’m talking. It’s a scandal that nothing has been done about rare diseases for so long. I’ve changed that.”

Baturin nodded. He knew that in Skolkovo, not only nanoengineers, materials scientists, and computer scientists were doing research, but also medical scientists, biologists, and pharmacologists. They were making progress. But for the disease Baturin was suffering from, they would still be too late.

“You want me to destroy the Arkonide ship,” he realized. “You want me to smuggle a bomb into their vessel.”

The tsar nodded.

“For a monument?”

The older man leaned forward and looked him in the eye. “For whatever you demand, Michael Sergeyevich. We can leave the state out of it, with its medals and benefits. I’m not petty.”

“Doesn’t the state belong to you?”

The tsar laughed heartily at that. “I think that’s an exaggeration. Let’s put it this way: I hold something like a blocking minority.”

Baturin negotiated well. A house for his parents, a generous fellowship abroad for his son, whom he hadn’t seen in years, a considerable sum for the woman he had once loved almost more than he’d later hated… The hatred had faded, as everything eventually did.

The tsar sipped from his bottle. Then he put it down and said, “At some point, we’ll return to the simple things and wonder why we made all these detours.”

Baturin nodded. “Will Morozova and Yakunin be informed?”

“I’ll leave that up to you.”

Baturin hadn’t informed them. Not during the flight, not on the Moon, not even when the question had been raised regarding which of them would board the behemoth.

He’d let Gleb go. From the start, he had harbored no doubts that the Americans were pursuing the same mission they were, and that the matter was already in good hands. He had decided to hold onto his own nuclear explosive device for a different purpose.

That purpose was now coming into reach.

Decide now.

New banter arose when Nyssen fiddled a pack of cigarettes out of his spacesuit to Bull’s boundless amazement.

“I suppose you don’t mind?” the pilot’s fellow American asked

with an impertinent grin.

“How did you get those on board? Deringhouse!” Bull yelled.

“True love always finds a way,” Nyssen murmured, trying to tear open the pack with his gloved fingers.

“Go ahead and smoke,” growled Bull. “But outside.” He pointed into space.

“You’re a despot.” Nyssen put the pack away.

Baturin wondered what game the two astronauts were playing. *Stress*, he thought. *They are putting pressure on Bull with these maneuvers.*

“Reginald,” said Deringhouse, “now is your chance. Maybe your last.”

“Hm... In my experience, life is full of chances. Like Ebay: you only have to drop by and strike at the right time.”

Deringhouse didn’t laugh. He looked straight ahead, where Europe was now visible under a thin veil of clouds. “We still have the backup runways at Fairford, near Esenboğa, or at Cologne Bonn Airport.”

“Has it escaped you that the *Stardust* doesn’t need such runways anymore? I can land wherever I want.”

“Exactly,” Nyssen chimed in. “You can. Major Rhodan can’t give you orders here. Or has he promoted himself? Space Admiral Rhodan?”

Bull grinned. “On the contrary, he’s taken his leave.”

“His leave from what?” Deringhouse asked warily. “From NASA? From the United States? Reginald, you don’t just quit your nationality.”

Morozova laughed out loud. “You should have paid a little more attention in your history classes, Mr. Deringhouse. Your state

emerged after quitting its nationality. Legally, you're a British colony, aren't you?"

Deringhouse said, "There were treaties that..."

"After a war," Morozova said. "After every war, there are all kinds of treaties on all kinds of paper. How many deaths did your independence cost? Would you feel more at ease if you were waging a war against Rhodan? How many deaths would that war have to produce before you sat down at the table with him and gave him what you couldn't take from him anyway?"

"Nobody wants a war," Deringhouse answered.

"Then you shouldn't start one," Bull growled.

"The *Stardust* is state property," Nyssen reminded him.

"You can bill us for it later. We'll pay for it."

"With what?"

"With services, maybe. Just wait and see."

"At least drop us off," Nyssen demanded. "Do a stopover somewhere in Europe."

Bull shook his head, but he seemed to be thinking.

"The Europeans might attack the *Stardust*," said Baturin.

The pilot nodded and rerouted the spacecraft. Baturin recognized the maneuver right away. About 2,000 kilometers above the Earth, 1,600 kilometers above the ISS trajectory, the pilot put the vessel into orbit.

"What are you up to?" Deringhouse asked.

He's buying himself time to think, Baturin figured.

"We'll negotiate with Rhodan," said Nyssen. "If you want to prevent us from getting our hands on the Arkonide stuff, open the

bulkheads to the cargo bay and dump it out. Throw out the robots. It can all burn up in the atmosphere."

"Mr. President wouldn't be too happy about that," the pilot retorted.

Nyssen laughed. "Who's happy anyway?"

Bull sighed and briefly closed his eyes. "If you could shut your mouths for a second," he said, "there's a chance we'll survive the day."

"What do you mean?" asked Deringhouse.

"I won't land in Europe," Bull said. "And whether I land at all is entirely up to you, Mr. Baturin." He looked the cosmonaut in the eye. "You have to decide. If you want to detonate the nuclear device, do it now. I won't take you to the Gobi."

Baturin was silent.

"How long have you known?" asked Deringhouse.

Bull shrugged. "All the militaries I know have the same poor imagination. When they come up with an idea on the American side, the Russians will inevitably do the same. Atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, neutron bombs, everything always happens at the same pace. On board the Arkonide ship, there was only one nuclear explosion. I don't consider you guys"—he looked at Deringhouse at Nyssen—"to be capable of such a task. Freyt was of a different caliber. Freyt was the guy."

"Why didn't he blow us up right away?" asked Nyssen.

"Because he saw the chance to catch Rhodan and the Arkonide machines in the Gobi."

"Support for the Chinese."

"Maybe. Or maybe he wants to prevent the equipment from falling into the hands of the Chinese. Or..." He turned to Baturin. "Did you improvise this plan?"

The Russian remained silent.

“You’re such an ass,” Morozova saif. “Simply a schmuck.”

“I’m not going to land,” Bull insisted. He folded his hands behind his neck. “I’ve had enough of this nonsense. You won’t get to the *Stardust*. I’m going to prevent that. The robots will prevent that. We’re staying in orbit. I assume the ignition mechanism is constructed in a way that we can’t forcibly remove the bomb. Maybe it even detonates if your body is no longer emitting vital signs. Maybe I should try that and order the robots to kill you.” He closed his eyes and grinned. “I’ll think about it.”

“You want to offer me something in return for not detonating the bomb?” Baturin asked.

“Not a cent.”

Baturin grinned. “Then give me an argument for why I shouldn’t.”

Bull unfolded his arms and pointed outside with his right hand. “Two hundred billion stars in the Milky Way alone. Probably more, maybe twice as many. If you detonate that, you won’t see a single one of them.”

Baturin laughed. “You think I’ll join Perry Rhodan? You really think so?”

“Didn’t you already?”

“When would I’ve done so?”

“When you boarded the Moon rocket.”

Nyssen burst into incredulous laughter. “Weak point, Bully,” he said. “Because that would apply to me and Deringhouse as well. You’re losing your sense of reality.”

“He’s not,” Baturin objected. “He’s simply creating his own.”

The Russian opened his suit. He let Bull, then Deringhouse, help

him to remove the nuclear apparatus. The Arkonide robots eventually took charge the explosive device and the ignition set.

Turning to Morozova, Baturin said, “If only to prove that I’m not an ass after all.”

“Blintz! But you are,” Morozova replied, her whole face beaming. “Quite an attractive one, though.”

Bull steered the *Stardust* out of its orbit and in the direction of the Gobi. A few minutes later, the ship plunged into the atmosphere.

Gradually, the light glow of their entrance faded. Everyone in the cockpit kept quiet as if they could assist Bull with their concentration. Theoretically, Baturin knew what the pilot had to do during the landing approach. At an altitude of about fourteen thousand meters, he should have switched off the landing control unit.

He didn’t.

Morozova looked at Baturin from the side and raised her eyebrows questioningly. He briefly shook his head. *No idea.*

Baturin read the displays on the monitor. The *Stardust* was still flying at just over seven hundred kilometers per hour; its gliding angle was surprisingly flat at ten degrees. Of course, not nearly as flat as the large passenger aircrafts, which approached land at two to three degrees, but still.

The attack began when the *Stardust* was flying at less than three thousand meters. Baturin saw one, then three more missiles shooting towards them. They were still so far away from the ship that he didn’t see them spatially as much as tiny white blurs in the gray-blue of the sky. They were approaching fast.

Nyssen stretched out his arm and pointed towards the missiles. Still, everyone kept quiet. Baturin didn’t know what he actually expected from Bull and the ship. He threw a glance over his

shoulder at the robots, but the automatons were standing motionless.

The missiles were approaching from the front. Baturin now saw the four thin condensation trails behind them. It seemed as if a lurid claw were reaching for them, the missiles its fingernails. Baturin had the sensation of sitting in a 3D movie. But in a moment, the weapons would enter reality, hit or even punch through the shell of the *Stardust*, and explode, and a flood of light would take everything from him, even his last moment.

Suddenly, Baturin felt himself being pressed into his seat. Something had jerked the *Stardust* upward, abruptly and with great force. For the blink of an eye, he felt weightless, then the craft lowered its nose and shot down.

“Bozhe moy,” Morozova croaked.

At the edge of his vision, Baturin realized that more missiles were rushing towards them. The *Stardust* was rotating around its own axis as if it had started to tailspin. Then Bull pulled it level, tipped it to the right, and sent it into a spin again.

Baturin had long since lost his sense of up and down.There was a taste of iron in his mouth, as if someone had put an ancient coin on his tongue. He swallowed something. His ears felt padded. It seemed to him that someone was talking or screaming, but he couldn’t understand a word of it; not the language, not even the voice.

It has to stop, stop, he thought.

All of a sudden, they were flying along gently and smoothly. In the distance, he saw something like a blue mirror in the landscape. It must have been the Juyan salt lake.

“Nice seeing you guys,” Nyssen groaned.

“Hold on tight!” Bull ordered in a calm voice.

Baturin would have liked to laugh. Hadn’t his hands been clawing the armrests of his chair the whole time? But he didn’t

want to disturb the almost solemn silence in the cockpit.

Then something smashed into the aircraft.

The *Stardust* crashed.

Part 3

Crest

July 5-8, 2036

The Cradle of Humanity

On the evening of July 5, 2036, Manoli stood on the bank of the river and waited. To the north, in the direction of the Red Sea, the Awash flowed towards the horizon. To the southwest, farther inland, the river disappeared behind a bend after about a kilometer.

He heard children's laughter, their shouting, their teasing. He didn't understand a word. *There are over eighty languages in this region,* he thought. *Amharic, Oromo, Somali, Afar*... The vast majority of these were unknown to him by name.

A boy paddled by on a papyrus boat, singing at the top of his lungs. A couple of children were dancing on stilts, legs bare, chests and faces painted white. Two men, bare-footed, wrapped in long white tunics, strode past with shouldered automatic rifles and saluted him sternly. They walked to a slightly crooked pole and raised a flag. Then the African tricolor flapped in the cool evening breeze: green, yellow and red. On it, against a blue background, the five-pointed star that looked as if it had been laid out with golden pick-up sticks.

At last, Haggard stepped out of the building where the more intensive examinations took place and diagnoses were made. The giant figure walked slowly towards Manoli. He stood next to the astronaut and followed his gaze to the flag.

"Green for the greening land, yellow for love, red for the blood shed in the fight for freedom. Are you aware that Ethiopia is the oldest state on Earth?"

"No," Manoli admitted. "Is it?"

“Oh, yes. It wasn’t always called Ethiopia, though—or Ityoppeia, as they say here. D’mt, Axum, Abyssinia... Many names, one state.” He pointed at the flag. “The pentagram there is the seal of King Solomon, who slept with Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, who brought him balm and jewels, and for his singers, zithers and harps made of Algum wood. He fathered a son with her—Menelik—who brought the Israelites’ Ark of the Covenant with the stone tablets of the law from Jerusalem to Axum, to the whole of Ethiopia, where it still lies to this day, in the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion, guarded by a monk who is the only person allowed to see it unconcealed.”

“Indeed. You believe that?”

Haggard smiled. “Where does knowledge end, and where does faith begin, Manoli? Have you never experienced something incredible? Isn’t it incredible that we’re standing here today? This is the oldest settled area of humanity. A little farther to the south of the country, people live as they did at the beginning of time: on milk and blood, honey and millet. Here is our original homeland. Here, right here, humanity was born. On this land. On the banks of this river, the first people sat and looked at their reflections in the water, and said to themselves, ‘This is me.’ And now...”

Manoli waited.

“Now our first guest from a different solar system is sleeping here.” Haggard laughed quietly. “It’s like we’ve come full circle.”

“How is he?” Manoli asked.

“Bad,” Haggard replied. “He’s terminally ill.”

“Can you cure him?”

“Yes.” The man, towering over Manoli by two heads, brushed a hand through his dark blond hair. His eyes were remarkably blue.

A textbook doctor from an early-evening series, he thought. A man you wished would step up to your bedside in an emergency and, with that caring, healing look in his eyes, say, “Don’t you worry anymore.”

“Yes,” Haggard repeated. “It can’t be excluded, at any rate.”

A very young, dazzlingly beautiful woman came over, carrying two light folding chairs. She limped a little.

“Ameseginalehu, Lettekiros,” Haggard thanked her.

“Minim aydel,” the girl answered with a smile beaming with youth.

“AIDS,” the doctor explained, watching the limping young woman walk away. “After being raped by ten, twelve men. Lettekiros was more dead than alive when they brought her here.” He pointed towards the other side of the river, where the roofed boats lay, red and blue and green.

“You could become exasperated with this planet,” Manoli remarked.

“No. We can’t afford exasperation. Nobody is coming to our rescue.”

“Some think they are.” Manoli nodded in the direction of the building where the Arkonide now lay.

“The salvation from the stars. Our saviors. Unfortunately, terminally ill.”

“What are you going to do, Dr. Haggard?”

“We’ll wait for a bit. Crest is very frail, and the examination was torturous for him. With my modest means here, unfortunately, there was no way around it. Let’s give him a couple of hours.”

“And then?”

“Then it’s actually very simple. I’m amazed that a technically advanced civilization capable of space travel at translight speed should prove incapable of curing this illness on board.”

“They weren’t exactly aboard,” Manoli told him. How had Bull greeted them? *Welcome to the future.* “It’s... They’re finished. They’re

addicted to their machines. In thrall to their games. Barely in their right minds anymore."

"And they don't have any automated mechanisms, no emergency facilities to tend to them?"

"Maybe they did and they've simply deteriorated for lack of maintenance. Eventually, every material will wear out."

Haggard laughed. "On a giant starship that's flown for dozens, maybe hundreds of light years?"

Manoli swallowed. "Of course, there are many possibilities."

"Sabotage of the medical system?"

"Yes, for example. But who should want to advance the old man's death?"

"Creatures who are finished? Addicted to their machines? Barely in their right minds?"

"Whatever."

"Whatever," the doctor agreed. "The Arkonide's blood is brimming with viruses that are destroying his immune system. His leukemia is merely a symptom of the infestation." Manoli waited, and Haggard nodded thoughtfully before continuing. "In some respects, however, it's a surprising virus."

"He's not terrestrial. So the viruses won't be either."

"Hardly. But it reminds me of a terrestrial virus. Does the Cafeteria roenbergensis virus ring a bell?"

Manoli nodded. "CroV. I heard about it during my studies." He grinned. "In a former life."

"CroV has more than 730,000 DNA nucleobases, more than 530 genes. That's remarkable; more genetic material than many a protozoon has, at any rate. The virus that has infected the Arkonide surpasses even CroV. It has almost 900,000 nucleobase pairs and

750 genes. You might say it's almost alive."

Manoli nodded. *An almost-life that was killing Crest.*

"Its virions not only have a bullet-shaped capsid but an additional virus shell. I'd call it a highly complex, exogenous retrovirus. When you see it in the model, and when you visualize its complex architecture, you could...well, almost consider it a work of art. A construct."

Manoli sensed that Haggard wanted to add something very different, but then he shook his head, mentally reprimanding himself. "As strange as the structure of the virus is, its cytopathic effect is strikingly similar to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Like HIV, it infects T lymphocytes and causes T-cell leukemia."

"A coincidence."

Haggard laughed. "What else?" he said. "Or should we assume that the Arkonides were here ages ago and brought HIV with them?"

Manoli shook his head. "Probably a simple coincidence."

"A coincidence," Haggard agreed. "In this case, even a lucky one. Based on my AIDS vaccine, I have already composed an antibody tailored to these Arkonide viruses. Once my generators have produced sufficient serum, we can give our patient a shot, and voilà!"

"'Voilà!' to what end?"

Haggard looked across the river. "The antiserum should at least reduce Crest's viral load. Ideally, it could even purge the body. Should, could..." He sighed softly. "But of course, the shot is untried, not tested on any animal or human. And Crest isn't even human. Anything is possible."

Manoli nodded. They sat there and watched as the boats on the opposite shore gradually lost their colors.

"Doctor Haggard, the master of viruses."

“I don’t think the viruses would consider me their master.” He laughed. “Rather their devil. Or evil itself.”

Lettekiros, the beautiful, limping girl, came over and said something in her melodic voice. Haggard nodded, thanked her, and stood up.

“Crest’s awake,” he announced. “Let’s go and make a decision.”

Crest lay with his arms stretched out beside his body, looking somewhat absent. *A marble statue. A death mask,* Manoli thought.

“You understand, sir, that we’re ready to take a risk,” said Haggard, after he had informed him of the results of the examination and outlined his plan.

“You should sleep on it once more,” Manoli suggested.

Crest smiled. “I have slept on so many things. When will the serum be ready for use?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Haggard informed him. “On Sunday.” In response to Crest’s questioning look, he clarified, “That’s what we call that day of the week. Sunday, then Monday.”

“You call them by the stars?” He closed his eyes and smiled. “Good.”

“You’ll dream?” Haggard asked.

“Shouldn’t I?” murmured Crest.

“Sometime, you’ll have to tell me what Arkonides dream about.”

Crest’s smile deepened. “Maybe one day the humans will relieve us from the weight of dreaming.”

“Maybe your dreams aren’t so different from ours after all.”

Crest’s breaths had become deep and regular. Haggard waved Manoli out of the room.

On July 6th, shortly after eight o'clock, Haggard and Manoli re-entered the room. Crest had only had a glass of water in the meantime. Haggard uncovered his arm and prepared him for the injection. The serum looked milky, with a slight bluish tinge.

Haggard had sat down next to Crest's bed. Even seated, he seemed taller than the black-haired Manoli, who was of medium stature at most. With the syringe in his hand, Haggard leaned back once again.

"Are we sure we want to take this risk?"

"Yes, thank you!" Crest said. "I've been thinking, and—without wanting to offend you, Dr. Haggard—I believe my chances are slim. I haven't taken a risk in a long time. After all, I'm a child of my nation, and we consider risk a disease. I'm not afraid of death, by the way." He paused and thought. Then he looked at Manoli. "Give my regards to Rhodan. Tell him that not everyone will lower their weapons just because he's coming to greet them, giving a speech. And tell him that I'm sure he'll find other ways."

Manoli laughed. "Why should I? He won't listen to me. You'd better tell him yourself."

Crest smiled for a brief moment, then grew serious. "Tell Thora I can't order her to do anything, but I strongly urge her not to take out her anger on the inhabitants of this planet. And lest she think you or Rhodan came up with the request, please tell her..."

Crest uttered some words in his very melodic, richly voweled, strangely melancholic-sounding voice and had Manoli repeat it to him twice. Then he stretched out his arm and held it up to Haggard. The doctor gave him the injection, administering the serum very slowly.

Manoli repeated the Arkonide phrase that Crest had told him, although he was certain he'd never need it again. The *Aetron* had been destroyed; Thora was dead. He hadn't told Crest yet.

A few seconds later, Crest relaxed. Only certain muscles were still twitching a little.

“Etomidate?” asked Manoli.

Haggard nodded. “And a pinch of Tramadol.”

For a while, the two doctors stood there quietly. Crest lay motionless. At last, Manoli broke the silence.

“Does the clinic have a morgue?”

“Why?”

“Where are the deceased patients temporarily stored before burial?”

“Nowhere. We have a cemetery right behind the hill.” Haggard made a vague gesture, as if Manoli ought to know which hill he meant.

“But you must have a cooling chamber for your drugs and food.”

“Of course. Even has its own power supply—maybe you saw the solar panels, and there’s an emergency generator.”

“I suggest clearing out the chamber.” Haggard looked at him, surprised. “Even if he dies, he’s infinitely valuable. He’s our proof that the Arkonides truly exist. Or did exist. That we aren’t alone, or weren’t alone, or ever will be alone again. He’s the first alien organism that human scientists can study.”

Haggard raised his eyebrows. “And I thought he was something like a friend to you.”

Manoli pondered the statement. “I don’t know if he’s my friend. Or if I’m his friend. After all, I’m not talking about the living Crest but a possible cadaver here, Dr. Haggard. I’m not friends with the dead as a matter of principle.”

Haggard activated some medical devices that would monitor the elderly alien. He took a pod from his pocket and connected it to the

apparatus.

“Come on,” he invited Manoli, “we can let him sleep. The machines are watching over him. In an emergency”—he tapped the pod—“they’ll alert me.”

The cooling chamber was neither very large nor overloaded. Manoli helped Haggard rearrange the drugs, the pallets of milk, and several meters of summer sausage. They cleared an oblong wooden table and moved it to the center of the chamber.

“Enough space for the body of the possibly dead extraterrestrial,” said Haggard. “You’re sure Crest is an extraterrestrial, by the way?”

“I’m sure,” Manoli said. “Do you have any doubts?”

“Well,” the doctor replied with a drawl, “during the examination, I was actually beginning to doubt it. It’s not just the specularity of the virus. The similarities between Crest and a human in physique, and in regards to circulation, the liver, and the whole endocrine system, seem to me, to put it mildly, to be against all probability. Shall we assume that throughout the universe life always develops according to the same blueprints? And this in spite of having so many different blueprints right here on Earth?” He shook his head. “I feel like I’m in one of those sci-fi movies where, due to a tight budget, they just put pointy ears on the actors or notch their noses to mark them as aliens. I can’t imagine the universe having that kind of limited budget.”

Manoli nodded. “There once was a theory that in early times, humans had contact with anatomically similar aliens from the stars.”

“Nonsense,” said Haggard. “The genetic pattern between humans and their ancestors is consistent. For 160,000 years we have graced the Earth with our presence. Did you have the impression aboard the spaceship that you were encountering a civilization 160,000 years old or more?”

“How would you recognize that?”

Haggard shrugged. “No idea. Maybe by their advanced antiviral therapies. Maybe by some completely fantastic technology enabling them to genetically reprogram their bodies to be the spitting image of the inhabitants of the planets they visit.” He laughed. “Come, Eric, I’m getting cold. Which is, of course, the purpose of this chamber.”

He cast another glance at the empty wooden table.

“Let’s hope we’ll be stacking tetrapaks and drugs on it again soon, and not corpses. If Crest wakes up, we should occasionally ask him where the cradle of his species lies according to his knowledge. And what brought him and his ship to this system, of all places. Come on, let’s go bowling.” Haggard laughed at Manoli’s perplexed face. “Just kidding. We still don’t have a bowling alley here yet. Should we have a cup of coffee? The coffee, like humans, originates from Ethiopia, by the way. Old friends, so to speak.”

Still chattering, Haggard pulled Manoli out of the cooling chamber.

Crest awoke at around 5 p.m. on Sunday afternoon. He kept his eyes closed and listened to the sounds outside the window and on the window pane itself. It rustled, swelled, and subsided, and on the glass there was something like the tapping of thousands of tiny fingers.

It was raining.

For a while, the Arkonide pondered how long it had been since he had heard rain. When he had last been separated from it by nothing but a narrow wall and a window. The wall of this building was like a membrane, allowing not only sound to pass through but also a little bit of the scent as well.

Crest breathed through his nose, smelling the rain and the Earth whose top layer was being loosened by the drops. *I’m alive*, he thought.

He propped himself up on his elbows. It tired him. Inside him,

there was a weariness he'd never felt before, as if he had worked physically for many hours. At the same time, the exhaustion didn't feel unpleasant.

A few minutes later, Manoli and Haggard appeared. The machines must have summoned them. Haggard examined him. He took a blood sample. Half an hour later, Crest knew that the virus had been destroyed.

"There's still the leukemia," Haggard said. "But that's a lesser project. Our remedies against this disease are fully developed. We just need a little patience. And of course, I can't exclude with absolute certainty that there might be complications with the therapy. After all, you're not human, are you?" He looked at Crest with a wide grin. Only Manoli had detected the quietly lurking undertone.

"Thank you!" said Crest. "Regarding patience: will the therapy be performed in this room?"

Haggard and Manoli looked at each other. "Yes," said Haggard. "But that doesn't mean you'd be imprisoned here. Would you like to take a look around outside?"

"It's raining.".

Haggard nodded. "You shouldn't catch a cold."

"And it would be good if you didn't necessarily cause a sensation, Crest," Manoli advised him. "You seem a little..."

"Out of this world?"

He and Manoli had buried the two Arkonide battledresses and the beamer outside of the clinic. Crest wore only light clothing, and on his feet were thin, flexible shoes that seemed almost like socks, made from a material that Manoli had never seen.

"We'll dress you up a little," Haggard suggested. "Then you can mingle with the other patients. You'd pass as an albino. Albinos aren't exactly rare among the African population." He hesitated briefly, as if wanting to add something, then clapped his hands

cheerfully and said, “Go! Look around. Have something to eat.”

Crest had gotten changed. He was now wearing a simple, long skirt with a light green checkered pattern and a gray T-shirt that was way too loose. “Afar clothing” Haggard had called it. The doctor had tied a wide blue scarf around his head and knotted it at his forehead. Crest hadn’t wanted to change his shoes, so Haggard had given him a pair that were big and chunky enough for the Arkonide’s feet to fit into, even with his own shoes still on.

Crest hesitated at the exit. Manoli nodded to Haggard and followed the alien. Next to the door was an umbrella stand. Manoli took an umbrella, opened it, and held it over Crest.

The elderly Arkonide looked at the umbrella for a moment, then took it from Manoli. “You’ve done enough for me,” he said. Then he stepped out into the rain.

Most of the buildings on the clinic grounds were containers that had been erected on a common foundation. Along with the other buildings, they formed a large U that opened onto the river.

The containers had been fitted with doors and windows. A slightly inclined, widely projecting roof spanned them all. The roof was freshly painted in a light blue. Crest could have walked from the treatment room to the dining hall without getting rained on, but he crossed the square diagonally instead.

He’s enjoying it, thought Manoli, who was leaning on the door frame, watching him go. *As if these are his first steps of freedom.*

The dining hall was in the middle building of the horseshoe-shaped clinic grounds. It was easily recognizable. A porch offered extra space for tables and chairs. The tables on this roofed terrace were almost all empty, however. People—patients and clinic staff alike—had crowded into the house.

At one table sat an African man with nothing but a glass of water. On the floor next to him crouched a monkey. The dark brown animal measured just under a meter in length; its skull short,

its snout protruding roundly from a black face. Its tail fanned out into a tassel at the end. It scraped the ground with its fingernails.

Crest stepped onto the porch and closed the umbrella. The man and his monkey looked at him curiously.

The Arkonide glanced briefly into the dining hall. People were staring at him. He was suddenly confronted with a hostile atmosphere, almost tangible. He stopped, as if he'd run into an invisible wall. Then he went inside.

At the food counter he was given a big, shallow bowl, filled with round bread and various meats and vegetables on top. With it was a glass of water. He hung the umbrella on his arm, took the bowl and glass, and left the hall. He sat down at one of the many empty tables on the porch and started to eat. It was surprisingly good.

The man with the monkey looked at him unflinchingly. Finally, he got up and walked over. Crest watched him curiously. The man whistled for the monkey; in two, three short leaps, the animal bounded over to them.

The man's skin was earth brown; his face was broad, his smile somewhere between trust and sheer desperation. On his head was a not very thoroughly tied turban; from the knot at his right temple, a piece of cloth dangled down to his cheek. Over the white T-shirt, he wore a kind of military jacket with pockets on the upper part of the sleeves. Short blue pants, naked legs, barefoot. In his hand was a shepherd's or wanderer's staff of light wood.

He addressed Crest, but the Arkonide couldn't understand him. "I don't speak your language," he explained.

The man replied, "I said this: that you are brave, sir, to eat alone. But not much wise."

"I didn't know that I had to be brave to eat here. I assume you don't intend to dissuade me from eating?"

The tall, slender man glanced at the bowl. "Oh no," he said. "Maybe has not enough spices sometimes, but you don't have to be

brave for it. May I sit?"

"Why, yes." Crest moved over slightly. The animal that the stranger had with him squatted on the floor and looked around. Once, it yawned with its mouth wide open, baring its teeth.

"Hm," the Ethiopian muttered, looking at the plate still full to the brim with fluffy flatbread. "Gursha?" he asked.

"Pardon me?"

"Gursha." The man pointed at the plate.

"Yes," said Crest. "Please, help yourself."

The Ethiopian reached for the bread and broke off a piece. He lifted it with a lump of beef and took a sniff. "Alicha," he said dispraisingly. "Not very spicy. Instead, a lot of niter kibbeh. You like the butter, sir?"

So far, Crest hadn't thought about what he was eating. "Yes," he said. "It all tastes delicious. I'm enjoying it." He laughed. "But I don't know the names of the dishes."

"Berbere is the pepper," said the man. "Wots the meats and vegetables. Probably lamb and chicken."

To Crest's amazement, the man brought his hand, with the bread dripping sauce, to the Arkonide's mouth as if he wanted to feed him. "Gursha," he repeated.

Crest hesitated. "That's very kind of you. But you don't have to worry. I'm still hale and can certainly eat on my own."

The man leaned a little closer. "I know," he said. "But the others see it and then think, careful! The two of them are having gursha; they're good to each other."

"Indeed," Crest replied uneasily. Then he opened his mouth. The Ethiopian carefully put the piece of flatbread on his tongue.

"Thank you!" Crest chewed. "Thank you very much!"

“My name’s Asaria Gezahegne. You know me?”

“No,” Crest answered cautiously.

“I don’t know you either.”

Crest considered feeding him in turn but refrained from doing so. “My name’s Crest da Zoltral. I hope you don’t mind if I don’t feed you gursha myself?”

“Okay, okay.”

“You should still have some.”

Gezahegne ate. Crest looked at the monkey. The monkey looked grimly back.

“This is Bezabeh,” Gezahegne said, introducing the animal. “He’s a gelada. Some confuse with baboon.” He crowed with mirth and tenderly tapped the animal with his foot. “I bought this one.”

Crest hesitated. “A good purchase, I hope!

Gezahegne pointed at the bald red spot on the otherwise very hairy chest of the animal. The spot had the silhouette of a sandglass. “It’s not a bleeding heart, but it looks like one.”

“Oh,” said Crest helplessly.

“That means he’s looking for a woman.”

“Sorry. I don’t have a suitable one on hand.”

Gezaghene laughed out loud and patted the baboon’s head. “Did you hear that, Bezabeh? The white man has no wife for you.”

“He speaks English?”

“No. Maybe. Who knows? I don’t speak English either. Only radio English.”

“Radio English?”

“Yes. There is a program on the radio and you learn English. Do you also speak radio English, or did you learn from your mother?”

Crest smiled. “Well, as my mother didn’t speak English, I probably also speak a kind of radio English.”

Gezahegne nodded contently. “Bezabeh’s clan isn’t afraid of human. So they caught him who doesn’t defend himself, and then come on.”

“I see.”

“Then I bought him. Who knows, who knows,” Gezahegne continued in an ominous voice, nodding to the little creature, who looked ostentatiously in a different direction. “Ungrateful fish.” He stroked the animal’s scrubby, ocher fur tenderly. “If I buy him a lady gelada, we’ll make a big family.”

“Do you have a family yourself, Mr. Gezahegne?”

“Yes,” the man replied cheerfully. “But all dead.”

“Oh.” The psyche of the planetarians was apparently anything but simple. Crest had a giggle over the idea of engaging Thora, or better yet Kemath, in conversation with this man.

“Maybe me too in the near future. Who knows, who knows.” Gezahegne leaned confidentially towards Crest. “The reason is AIDS.”

“You’re suffering from AIDS?”

He had heard about the epidemic from the radio broadcasts he had watched, listened to, and analyzed aboard the *Aetron*. For decades, humanity had been fighting AIDS, its mutations, and the devastating flu pandemics occurring at ever shorter intervals. The virological war was being waged by scientists who were just as ingenious as they were blind with rage. And yet he himself owed his life, it seemed, to one of those brilliant strategists.

“That’s how it is,” said Gezahegne. “I’m suffering. Tricky kind of AIDS that wears masks. The doctor marvels and marvels and

marvels. He has to conjure up his medicine pretty new."

"I don't think he literally conjures it up," said Crest.

"I know. Been kidding."

The local man looked at the river, and Crest was thankful for that. The conversation had tired him, and he was alarmed by his own weakness. The rain still hadn't stopped, but it had drawn a kind of green veil over the world. Everything, in fact, was green.

Crest didn't know any of the plants that he saw. He had never heard of umbrella thorn acacias, which spread their flat crowns along the rocky stretches of the riverbank. He didn't know about eucalypts or jacaranda trees. But he watched their shadowy images darken in the rain-streaked, slowly flowing river, watched the water's surface fade, turning bluer, then violet, then dull like liquid lead.

A gang of pubertal pelicans tussled with cormorants. Ibises poked at the mud for a while, then rose from the shore and headed towards their night quarters, necks stretched long.

Crest was amazed by how close to the wilderness these people lived. *As if they draw strength from that proximity*.

"This AIDS was handed to me by a woman," Gezahegne said.

"A woman?"

"I rented her," he explained. "She and her colleagues wander the country like that, offering themselves here and there. You look and choose. Like a market. I saw her and asked, "How much are you?" She wasn't very expensive; I'd have paid that and even once more or three times that. I liked her, and she was very, very warm. A Hamer, you know?"

"No."

"Wait," said Gezahegne. He pulled a piece of paper from his vest pocket and gave it to the Arkonide. It was a simple, two-dimensional photograph. The girl looked directly into the camera,

serious but not very sure of herself. She held her left hand in the crotch of a light-colored tree, almost as if she had to support herself. Her slender torso was covered by only an animal fur, but the fur was thin, leaving her breasts exposed. A necklace of shells hung low around her neck; wooden hoops adorned her arms. Her eyes were brown, her lips full, a dark bronze hue. Deep black, short coiled hair with strings of blue beads in it and a headband that sported a tall blue-black feather.

The opposite image of Thora, thought Crest. "You had sexual contact with this woman for a fee?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," Gezahegne said. "Very sexual. Do you think that's bad, sir?"

Crest didn't quite understand the question. What was supposed to be bad about erotic contact?

"The Hamer made the first fire on Earth. All people have to respect them, sir! And they speak the language of paradise. There's no word in there for good, no word for evil. None for sin, and none for honor. Just *barjo.*"

Crest had no idea what the man meant by either "paradise" or "barjo." "What does that mean?"

"Barjo is everyone and everything. Can't be translated. Without barjo, no millet in the field, the cattle dying of thirst in the meadow. The whole world and the entire universe plunge into chaos without barjo. Without barjo, no man can find the most beautiful woman."

"And you, sadly, had no barjo?" Crest asked.

Gezahegne looked at him, baffled. "Yes, I did: this woman."

"But she infected you with AIDS."

"She did, all right. She also cost me money. But I had barjo, and I hope she'll also have barjo until the end of time."

The end of time, Crest thought and closed his eyes.

“Do you want to be my friend, sir?” Gezahegne asked.

Crest thought. “I don’t know if I could be a good friend to you,” he said. “I’m such an old man, and you’re young.”

“Oh, yes,” said Gezahegne earnestly. “But Bezabeh is, as for him, young as well, and we’re still friends.”

Crest laughed.

The Ethiopian looked at him long and unabashedly. “You’re so much whiter than the whites. Does that run with the family?”

“Sort of.” Crest wasn’t quite sure he understood the point of the question.

“Do you live very away from here, sir?”

Crest looked down the river. “Yes,” he said.

“Up or down the river?”

“Both.”

“You’d have a sister by any chance, perhaps? Because some people think sleeping with an albino cures AIDS.”

Crest sighed. “I’m afraid you’ve fallen for a rumor, Asaria.”

His companion nodded sadly. “Always I’m too trustful, and for sure I’ll die sooner than you, sir.”

Crest smiled thinly. “I don’t think so.”

“But I do. Shall we bet?”

“Bet?”

Gezahegne explained the concept to him.

“What would the survivor win?” Crest asked.

Gezahegne pointed to the monkey. “Bezabeh. The jackpot.”

“Without any question.” Crest nodded deliberately.

“Let’s think it over.” The man yawned. “Well, well, I’ll go to sleep, then,” he said.

“Yes,” said Crest. He was tired as well.

“This AIDS,” Gezahegne added, as if remembering something long forgotten. “Some think it’s magic. Introduced by magicians.” Crest waited. “Some think men like you who are whiter than whites, albinos, they make the AIDS. They make the AIDS and other tortures. You can’t catch the AIDS, it’s so small. But they say if you catch the magician...”

“I understand,” said Crest. “That’s why it’s not very wise of me to sit here, right?” He laughed. “Only stupid; not even brave.”

“None of the patients are going to attack you, sir,” said Gezahegne. “None of them. They’ve all seen the gursha.”

Crest nodded. “Thank you! I thank you very much.”

The rain abruptly thinned and stopped. Only small trickles ran down from the porch roof into puddles. It was still warm. Some guests from the dining hall came outside; they looked at Crest and his fellow diner, then stepped out into the square.

“Don’t be afraid, sir,” Gezahegne said, his voice clearly raised. “I’ll come tomorrow morning and bring you fresh water. In a clay jug. Nowhere else does water stay cool as well as in a clay jug, you know.”

Crest nodded gratefully. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“And if I die tonight, you shall win Bezabeh. Bet or no bet.”

“You won’t die.”

“I’ll do my very best not to, sir,” Gezahegne promised.

He stood up and started walking. Clicked his tongue briefly. The monkey didn’t hesitate for a second; it gave Crest another

undecipherable look, then followed the Ethiopian.

July 7 passed. Crest slept a lot. He'd eaten breakfast by himself. Haggard examined him again. Manoli came to check on him, and they talked for a while. Shortly after breakfast, Asaria Gezahegne appeared in the house and sat with the Arkonide. The monkey was with him again.

They talked. Gezahegne told him about his world, of Ethiopian things that he, who'd never left the wider surroundings of his village, only knew from hearsay. But he told it in his peculiar English in such a way that Crest could picture everything as if seeing it as a holography: the many angel heads ("What angels are? Well, let's say: they're very incorporeal, therefore no virus gets them, just goes through them!"), living between the overhead beams of Debre Berhan Selassie, marveling at the world with their big eyes; the city of Gondar that you should enter through the gate of the flutists; the granite steles of Axum; the wooden statues of the Konso clans, the wakas carrying the faces of the dead who lived on in them; the churches of Lalibela, the new Jerusalem, carved deep into the Earth; the boiling, hissing world of Dallol, its garish yellow salt walls and the turquoise ponds in between that looked like they'd fallen from an alien star onto the Earth.

The terminally ill man narrated all this with such an irresistible enthusiasm that Crest became more and more involved with this planet and its labyrinthine, varied cultures.

Gezahegne brought lunch from the dining room. Bezabeh stayed with Crest and eyed him with great suspicion while his master was away. At one point, Crest reached out to touch the monkey but immediately recoiled. *Why is that?* he rebuked himself, amused. *After all, I'm not human.*

Maybe you're on your way to becoming one, dude, his extra sense kicked in. This special voice, with which his consciousness could address itself, with which it commented on its subjects from an alternative point of view or redirected his attention, had long kept silent. Crest wasn't sure he was happy to hear it again now.

We agreed that our way couldn't last for much longer, he thought.

And which one of us broke that agreement, dude?

I did, of course. Crest continued the mental dialogue. *But as always, you'll follow me.*

That's what I was woken up for, his extra sense reminded him. *It wasn't a rebuke, by the way. Maybe you're on a good path.*

Thank you!

When the Ethiopian returned, bringing two bowls of injera with him, he seemed a little gloomy.

It's nothing personal, the extra sense commented. *Or at least it goes beyond the personal. Ask him, dude.*

"What's wrong with you?" Crest asked. "Do they still want to slaughter me and convert me into health pills?"

"They asked for you," said Gezahegne as he threw some food to the monkey.

"They?"

"From elsewhere. Nobody familiar."

"We should inform Manoli. And Haggard." But he was too tired to get up and look for them, so he decided to do it later.

After lunch, he slept. When he woke again, it was early evening. Gezahegne was lying on the floor and snoring loudly; his monkey had put his head on his chest and was sleeping as well.

Crest stood up. He found Manoli with Haggard in a lab. The two looked up; they had obviously been talking about him.

"A new cause for concern?" the old alien asked.

"No," said Haggard. "We'll start therapy for your leukemia today." He smiled encouragingly.

“My new friend told me that someone asked about me,” Crest said.

“Asaria Gezahegne?”

“He doesn’t strike me as suffering from paranoia,” Crest continued.

“No,” said Haggard. “He’s a smart guy. To be honest, I don’t dislike the fact that he took you under his wing.”

“I’m not quite as easy to handle as his gelada.”

“Shall I look into it?” Manoli glanced at Crest. They still had the two protective suits and the beamer.

“Who do you suspect?” Crest asked.

Manoli shrugged. “Journalists. Secret agents. At worst, military intervention forces, Ethiopian or U.S. or Chinese. I don’t know. But I’d feel better if we returned to the Gobi. Under the dome.” He looked at Haggard, seeking advice.

“I don’t know what your means of transport is, and I won’t ask about it either,” Haggard replied. “The Gobi is far. I don’t consider Crest to be transportable yet. I’m sorry I have to put it bluntly, Crest. Give me at least two or three days.”

“You could accompany us,” Manoli suggested.

Haggard pondered that. To Crest’s surprise, he seriously seemed to be considering the invitation.

“I think that’s exactly what I wanted to hear,” he finally said. “And exactly what I feared would be offered. I can’t just leave, Eric. There are people here who need me.”

“He’s right,” Crest agreed.

Haggard cleared his throat. “However, there’s a young Chinese physician in Dessie, the next town over. Dr. Zen Fanzhi studied with me in Australia and worked here at the clinic for over a year. But

he'd have to take care of some things first. Two days?"

"We should leave no later than the day after tomorrow. As early as possible," said Manoli.

"On Wednesday, then. At the break of day."

Haggard pulled out a pod and spoke to the doctor in Dessie. Zeng agreed. Then Haggard began the leukemia therapy.

Crest slept for the rest of the day and didn't wake up until the following afternoon. He ate, spoke briefly with Haggard, then with Manoli. He asked both of them about Asaria Gezahegne. Neither had seen him.

That was on Tuesday, July 8, 2036.

The Escape

That night, Crest was woken up. He opened his eyes. A hand, smelling tartishly like soil, covered his mouth.

"Quiet," a voice whispered. "It's me, Asaria."

Crest nodded carefully. Gezahegne took his hand away. "We have to disappear," he said.

For a moment, Crest feared the other patients had set out to take him as prey. But it was completely silent outside. He pulled off his blanket and stood up.

"Let's go see Haggard," he suggested quietly.

"No, no," Gezahegne urged. "Please, you're my friend, sir. We have to hide you. The doctor can't. Doctor Haggard isn't from here. He only knows the clinic. The clinic doesn't have a hiding place."

He's serious, the Arkonide's extra sense warned. *Decide if you have a reason to distrust him, dude. I don't see one.*

Crest got up. Gezahegne took the blanket from the bed and held it out to him. “It could get cold.”

The alien threw it over his shoulders. Gezahegne pointed at the chunky shoes Crest had placed under the bed, but the alien shook his head. He’d have to navigate unknown territory. The soles of the Terran shoes were deaf; if he put them over his own, he wouldn’t be able to feel the ground.

“Where are we going?”

“Into the forest. Bezabeh is guiding us.”

After they left the dimly lit clinic grounds behind, Gezahegne led him to the river. They climbed down the embankment, with the younger man helping him wherever it got steep. For a while, they walked along the rocky bank.

“The bridge,” Gezahegne said.

The structure smelled of wet wood, and it consisted of wet wood. Crest felt the slippery slickness as he walked across the planks. The soles of his shoes rippled a bit to give him a better grip. He glided one hand over the handrail without actually holding onto it. The wood felt pleasant, cool, and smooth.

Then there was dense forest surrounding them, and they were slowly creeping forward over soil from which roots protruded here and there. Lush life.

The half Moon shone, but as they walked under thick canopy, they were in absolute darkness. Eventually, Gezahegner had to lead Crest by the hand.

Now and then, the Ethiopian slowed down a little. Then Bezabeh, a little ways ahead of them, whistled. Crest got the impression that the monkey was indeed guiding them.

Sometimes an animal would scream. Crest assumed there were predators living in the forest that could be dangerous to a human—big cats, perhaps, or nocturnal reptiles. To his own amazement, he

felt stimulated by the idea. Every now and then, the canopy cleared and he could see a section of the night sky. He knew that some people saw images in the stars, sketches of gods and heroes who had earned a place in the heavens through all kinds of heroic deeds.

From its very beginning, this civilization had imagined life across the stars. But they certainly hadn't imagined it his way: traveling in steel spheres manned by dreamers who considered every outside world unacceptable, ultimately crashing on a lifeless lump of Moon.

Crest didn't know when the feeling of being followed began. Gezahegne had begun to walk faster. He was gasping. Crest was out of breath as well, but he allowed himself to be hauled along by the younger man.

They stopped in a clearing, of all places.

"Wait," Crest said. He bent forward and propped his hands on his thighs. "Just a moment."

"We have to go on," the other insisted.

"How do you know that?" Crest's breath whistled.

Gezahegne pointed ahead. At first, the Arkonide saw only a shadow stirring in the shade. Then they stepped out of the cover of the forest on all sides. Within moments, the two men were surrounded. The circle tightened around them without undue haste. Some of the figures held long-barreled guns in their hands; others carried handguns.

They faced each other silently and motionlessly.

The man on the right, his extra sense said. *Everybody else is concentrating on you. They're following orders. He, however, is overseeing everything. He's the one giving the orders, dude.*

Crest looked at the strangers one by one. In the moonlight, their faces should have been clearly visible, but the men had painted themselves with dark patterns.

The Arkonide didn't want to continue looking at the man to

whom his extra sense had pointed, but the fellow drew his gaze. He studied his harsh face, one side devastated by scars, the other almost untouched, as if the man had lived two very separate lives. He seemed relaxed, superior, accustomed to giving orders. An experienced military man. Somebody who, had he been an Arkonide, would have quickly risen to command a ship, maybe even a squadron, in the fleet.

He looked Crest straight in the eye and smiled. His harsh face became unexpectedly soft. Crest suddenly felt the urge to confide in him.

Careful, dude, the extra sense warned. *Keep an emotional distance*.

The elderly Arkonide succeeded with difficulty.

“In the end, we always recognize each other,” the man said to him. He stepped out of the circle and towards them. “Crest da Zoltral, I presume?”

Crest waited. The stranger bowed slightly, his face showing a hint of mockery, true reverence, and curiosity all at once.

“My name’s Clifford Monterny. I’d be glad if you would be my guest.”

“Does this invitation also include my companions?” Crest threw a quick glance at Gezahegne and Bezabeh. “My friend?” he corrected himself.

“Which of the two is your friend, then?” Monterny asked and laughed at his own joke.

As loudly as if he has nothing to fear. As if the forest belongs to him.

“No, unfortunately not,” the stranger continued. It was as if his face were suddenly crystallizing from within. Not that anything about the color of his skin or its texture had actually changed.

His men pointed their guns at the Gezahegne.

“That’s too bad,” Crest replied, turning his back on Monterny. He

started walking away, heedless of the guns, which were now pointing alternately at him and the Ethiopian.

"He's your friend?" shouted Monterny. "You make friends fast."

"That impression is misleading." Crest stopped. "For a long time, I haven't made any friends at all."

If one disregards the encounter with this or that Planetarian aboard the Aetron, his extra sense noted.

"This is not necessary." Monterny turned to his men. They lowered their weapons, and Crest turned back around.

Monterny approached and stopped no more than a foot or two from Gezahegne. His face was mellow now. He said softly, in a sort of singsong voice, "Nightly encounters in the forest. Who will say, *please,* if they weren't only dreamed? What strange things are not dreamed up in us? Don't we make fools of ourselves by telling others about our dreams? Let's go home. Are we being treated by Dr. Haggard?"

"Yes," Gezahegne answered.

"Then we'll stay there. And in three, maybe four days, we'll go back to the clinic, then we'll have slept for a long time and cured a cold. We'll enquire about our friend, and maybe we'll worry about him if Haggard doesn't and nobody knows where he is. We don't know either, *please,* and nobody regrets it as much as us, do they?"

The Ethiopian nodded.

"This headache," said Monterny. "It's torturing us. Too bad our walk didn't bring us any relief."

Gezahegne whined quietly and put his fingertips to his temples.

"Stop that," said Crest coldly. "Stop it right now!"

Monterny lifted a hand and pointed his outstretched index finger at Crest. He said only a single word: *"Please."*

Crest felt instantly disoriented. Where was he? How had he gotten here? Something had been taken from him, but he didn't know what. Something in his consciousness had been twisted, forced to fade away; something had suspended him within himself. It was disenchanting. Depersonalizing.

He heard a voice whispering as if from afar, "Relief will come from sleep. To achieve that, it must be long and deep; only then is it beneficial. Let's go to sleep."

Gezahegne nodded as if in slow motion and walked off. After he had taken a few steps, his monkey barked shortly and followed him. Monterny's men dodged the man and let him pass.

Gradually, Crest regained his bearings. "Let go of me!" he said.

Monterny nodded. "Of course. May I repeat the offer? Will you be my guest, Crest da Zoltral?"

The Arkonide briefly closed his eyes. That sensation of becoming dazed, confused from the inside out, continued to affect him. He felt unpleasantly touched to the core. He didn't want to experience the feeling again.

"Yes," he agreed.

Monterny invitingly gestured him forward.

Part 4

General Bai Jun

July 4 to 5, 2036

Snake Man in the Year of the Dragon

General Bai Jun had set up his command tent where the noise of the detonations was only a faraway roll of thunder. When he closed his eyes, he could give in to the illusion that a heavy thunderstorm was looming outside—bottle-green rain, heavy drops slapping the rocks or hitting the sand and exploding like tiny bombs. Frog weather, peasant weather, lush forest and meadow weather. A world to which the Gobi offered the counter-image: the empire of minerals and dead water; the landscape as the enemy of man.

Sometimes, Bai Jun tried to dream in his tent about being back in Macau. Then the roll of thunder became the echo of faraway fireworks, and he'd imagine himself to be standing at one of the high windows of Tower A of the Galaxy Cotais. He'd direct his gaze to the artificial lagoon, which, lit up from below, was a fairy-tale blue. The outline of the palm trees, the very human sounds coming from the neighboring rooms, the wordless games of the couples in love.

The inner pockets of his jacket would be full of one hundred and two hundred yuán bills. He also indulged in the thought of the hands of an American or Mexican girl on the back of his neck, massaging him as a prelude to the night's activities. And the girl would make costly promises, speaking in Chinese full of false pitches and outlandishness.

Then the general would scare off the demons of beauty and return to the present. He felt himself getting into the rhythm of the blasts that his tanks were delivering. And in his inner eye, he saw how the dome of pure energy that Rhodan had built with alien machinery over the American spaceship took every blow

unflinchingly.

On the morning of July 4 in the year of the dragon and fire, in 2036, by civil count, He Jian-Dong, General Bai Jun's adjutant, entered the luxurious command tent. It smelled of tea, chicken, and vegetables from the wok, of sweat and leather.

According to the civil calendar, the general had been born in 1989, the year of the snake. Snake-born people were considered to be researchers, thinkers, and knowledge-gatherers; they were supposed to know the art of meeting the right people at the right time, and to be able to get people to talk, to entrust them with their secrets. It was said they were bad losers.

Of course, Bai Jun didn't believe in horoscopes as a matter of principle. To him, however, the characterizations applied fully, as he found out again and again.

Bai Jun was forty-seven years old, of medium height, attractive, his skin brown like the earth. He'd been born from a mixed marriage: his father Han, his mother Uighur. Women were few at the time, and the Chinese men (protected, single children pampered by legions of parents, grandparents, and other relatives) imported this scarce commodity from all over the world by way of online catalogues. African women from the hunger zones, Irish and Icelandic women from the new frost zones, Indians, Mexicans fleeing the perpetual drug war in their home country, refugees from the nuclear-contaminated deserts around Natans and Isfahan—women from all over the globe came and bore the Han children. China had become the planet's new genetic melting pot.

His parents had defied the one-child policy—Bai Jun had a sister. But she lived elsewhere, secret and out of reach for the time being. He smiled. There were plans for a family reunion. But those plans were dangerous. He had long agonized over the thought of giving his sister a hint.

Bai Jun had not married and had no official descendants. He was what they called "a barren branch." Maybe this childlessness was the cause for his special fondness for Jian-Dong, whom he treated quite like a son (not always to the adjutant's pleasure). Sometimes

the general's fondness weighed on him; sometimes both sides were unjust. He Jian-Dong was more indignant towards Bai Jun's doings than one would normally be towards a superior. Bai Jun could get angrier with He Jian-Dong than with any of his soldiers, like a father whose son had squandered his inheritance.

But like a real relationship between father and son, their connection was binding. And yet He Jian-Dong had parents of his own. Both his mother and father were mid-level party functionaries. After school, they had sent him directly to the military academy. He'd been born in Shanghai twenty-five years ago, a strikingly handsome man but—based on Bai Jun's observations—without an erotic appeal to either women or men. Beautiful like a dragon eye or a fictional soldier on a recruitment poster. Beautiful like a wave.

He quite disapproved of the general's lifestyle, his unproductive handling of women, his indeterminable nature. The younger man loved the definite, the military foundations of his existence, the political architecture of the state. His deep respect for the state, for the party, and especially for its general secretary, earned him a sarcastic remark from Bai Jun.

"Having idols," the general once said, "seems to me an utterly civic habitus. Every gleam can dazzle."

"Even the gleam of truth?"

"That especially." Bai Jun had laughed.

Now He Jian-Dong stood before the general, who had taken off his uniform and donned a yellow silk mandarin jacket instead.

"Sit down." Bai Jun pointed to a comfortable seat cushion.

His adjutant waved the offer away. "Our arsenal is becoming alarmingly depleted."

"Then our people are making good money."

"One might think it's corruption."

"One would be right about that. Do we need to worry? Are there

any weapons or ammunition missing?"

"No. I have the ammunition depots guarded by especially reliable people."

The general nodded. "So, what's missing?"

He Jian-Dong enumerated the list and concluded with a smile, "Among other things, we lost a Lì Zou."

"Indeed." Bai Jun pursed his lips. "Deplorable. What a waste of national wealth here. Who caused this national wealth to be wasted?"

His adjutant mentioned the names of soldiers from the logistics department supply subdivision. The general had never heard of them.

"Will you punish them?"

Bai Jun raised his hands. "We won't reward them," he said. "For the time being, we should have no knowledge of this disappearance, I mean. Show a little preoccupation, let there be speculation about an upcoming inventory, the arrival of an inspector, and so on."

The younger man nodded.

"Now, as for our Lì Zou: it just so happens to have that tracking chip we discussed?"

He Jian-Dong laughed briefly. "Yes, as luck would have it. We can locate it anytime. When shall we strike?"

The general considered that. "Not yet. Let's keep an eye on it. Who knows, maybe the new beneficiaries of the machine will find something that has escaped us so far. I can assume, can I not, that the machine is meant to assist competent civilians?"

His companion nodded. "A small group, as far as I can see. Mostly Europeans."

"Europeans," Bai Jun repeated. "But why not." For a moment,

there was silence. Then he continued, “I hear that we’re expecting a visit from Beijing.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Who will grace us with their unwanted presence?”

“Huang Hai-Jie,” said the general.

“The general secretary?” The adjutant’s face lit up with amazement. “We should consider that a great honor.”

“I’ll do my very best,” the general replied, narrowing his eyes. “I’d be delighted if you could welcome him and see to it that all the necessary steps are taken.” He Jian-Dong bowed gratefully. “Thank you! You may go if you wish. Although you might as well stay, by the way. Yi Khedrub wants to come by. Maybe he’ll bring some butter tea.”

The other shook his head in disgust. “I don’t know what you see in that Sino-Tibetan,” he said reproachfully.

“Every person has their talents,” Bai Jun answered thoughtfully.

“And Yi has a talent for making butter tea. With yak butter.”

“You shouldn’t underestimate him.” The general leaned forward a bit on his seat cushion and said confidentially, “After all, this man is armed.”

“Yes. With a magic dagger.”

Bai Jun raised one finger and smiled gently. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

A 37th Stratagem

Late on the morning of Saturday, July 5, 2036, two planes arrived from Beijing. The men who stepped out of them were quiet and discreet. Their clothes were made for the desert, partly street

suit, partly protective wear. Some of them held tablets, others small suitcases. Two wore some type of motorcycle helmet with the visors down.

He Jian-Dong didn't know which of them he should greet as his contact.

His concerns were unnecessary. One of the men stepped forward and, without formally presenting himself, handed over a double-folded, single sheet of paper. Jian-Dong opened it and briefly held it up to the light. The paper bore the general secretary's watermark.

"All right," he said, "what can I help you with?"

One of the helmeted men replied, "We want to look around headquarters and prepare everything for the general secretary's arrival."

"Why?" Jian-Dong asked with a distant smile. "We're among our own here. The enemy is two kilometers away."

No one in the group commented on his objection. He Jian-Dong offered them his company.

"No. Give me your pod number," said the man who had spoken. "If necessary, we'll call you."

Over the next few hours, they inspected the camp; then they asked He Jian-Dong via pod for some cross-country vehicles to take them closer to the energy dome. They weren't the kind of people whose demands one denied lightly, even if they hadn't identified themselves with the watermark.

"What are they doing?" Bai Jun asked.

"They're inspecting headquarters."

"Or are they hijacking it?"

"We're not in Macau. This is no casino. The general secretary is coming. We should be careful."

“Aren’t we always?”

After the men had seen as much as they wished, taken many notes on their tablets, and made a number of calls on their pods, they took up positions near the landing strip.

In the early evening, the general secretary’s plane arrived. He descended the gangway and stood in the fading glow of the day. Bai Jun received him in a plain uniform without any insignia.

The general secretary nodded curtly in greeting and pulled a cigarillo from a silver case.

“I see you’ve imitated Rhodan and gotten rid of all your insignias.”

Mechanically, Bai Jun fumbled in his pocket for the emblem with the U.S. flag he had found on the ridge. “My people know who I am.”

“Really?” The general secretary scrutinized him thoughtfully. He blew out some smoke. Sweat glistened on his forehead, trickled slowly down, slid from his high cheekbones to his neck. He smoked slowly; no muscles in his face moved.

“Let’s go to my tent,” Bai Jun suggested.

He Jian-Dong was expecting them when they arrived.

“May I offer you some tea?” asked Bai Jun. “Everything’s ready for the ceremony.”

“Thank you!” said the general secretary. “If you have it, a cold Coke for me.”

Bai Jun and his visitor sat down on a cushion facing each other. Jian-Dong had to dig through the refrigerator a bit to find a can of Coke.

The general secretary sighed softly. “So, our little island adventure has been postponed by world history,” he commented.

“It doesn’t have to be,” Jian-Dong said eagerly. “All the world now supposes us—that is, the general and myself—to be here in the Gobi. We could leave undercover. Stratagem number eight: visibly repair the walkways; secretly march to Chencanc.”

The general secretary held the cigarillo in one hand, and with the other he raised the soda to his lips and drank. Bai Jun heard him swallow. “Yes,” he said after putting the can on the ground.

Of course, the general secretary was familiar with the thirty-six stratagems. And stratagem number eight indeed suggested itself under the circumstances.

After the fall of the Qin dynasty, Xian Yu and Liu Bang had waged a war for the imperial throne. During an earlier campaign, Liu Bang had had the wooden bridges and walkways that led across the mountain gorges between Guanzhong and Hanzhong burned. That same year, he’d advanced again. In a great show, he’d had some soldiers begin to repair the wooden crossings. The enemy had thought Liu Bang’s troops would be tied up for years building those bridges. In fact, his main force had long since been marching to Chencanc by another route. Liu Bang had defeated the surprised enemy and established the Han dynasty, the longest-lasting of the Chinese imperial dynasties. That was over two thousand years ago.

“Stratagem number eight is without a doubt always good advice,” the general secretary said praisingly. “However, I understand that we’re not building bridges here, but tunnels. I find that variation appropriate.” He brought the cigarillo to his lips and puffed. “But I don’t know if the little island still means the Chencanc to us that we’d have to aim for.”

“Nobody’s paying attention to Taiwan anymore,” Jian-Dong siad. “We can take it in passing. Stratagem number twelve: with a light hand, lead the sheep away.”

Their guest raised his eyebrows. Bai Jun, of course, was also familiar with the story of the monkey king and the monk Tripitaka at the center of the twelfth stratagem.

“You have a very well-read adjutant,” their visitor remarked.

The general smiled, bowed thankfully, and imagined kicking his assistant's butt in such a way that he wouldn't open his mouth in the general secretary's presence again for years to come, except to offer him a Coke.

"What do you think?" the general secretary asked his host.

"I also highly appreciate my adjutant's advice," Bai Jun replied. He silently cursed under his breath. Hadn't he taught the younger man about caution and reserve over and over again? Why was he behaving this way?

"On the other hand, I don't want to rule out the possibility that some situations can't be fully grasped by the venerable stratagems."

The general nodded. "I also fear that for the Rhodan case, we will need a new—a thirty-seventh—stratagem."

Rhodan's Stratagem

They rode in two Beijing Benz Warrior jeeps; Bai Jun and the general secretary sat in the back of the first vehicle. He Jian-Dong gave the starting signal from the passenger seat. Bai Jun had designated Yi Khedrub, the Sino-Tibetan, as the driver.

Yi's father was a Han who had married a Tibetan. Yi had worked for Bai Jun for years. For reasons the general was unaware of, Yi had come to trust him and had told him more and more about his private life. Such a level of personal disclosure was rather strange to Bai Jun (when it didn't concern He Jian-Dong), but in this case he had permitted it, curious to see where it would lead.

Like many sons and daughters of the migrated Han, Yi had become completely Tibetanized, even adopting the Bon religion. In his army belt, next to an old Walther P111, he also carried a phurba. The three-sided dagger was made of meteorite iron; its pommel showed the three faces of the god: peaceful, joyful and wrathful. The three faces had gathered under a stylized fur cap. The

phurba was meant to enable Yi, with the magical spiritual assistance of his god, to strike his opponent with deadly certainty over the farthest distances.

In addition, Yi Khedrub always carried a flask of salty butter tea. The tea, with yak butter stirred into it, resembled a thin soup.

The bodyguards of the general secretary followed them at a short distance in the second jeep. The general secretary looked silently at the camp—the tent camp for the troops, the maintenance station for the Type 101 Hu tanks and their predecessors, the Type 99s, the combat and transport helicopters, the drones ready to launch, the ammunition depots, the kiosks for the soldiers, the water tanks and food silos that Bai Jun had insisted be stockpiled to feed the masses of pilgrims who kept showing up despite the barriers.

They saw men and women in uniform distributing food and bottles and pouring water into canisters. To his dismay, Bai Jun also spotted several children among the pilgrims. Most wore clothes that were appropriate for the conditions in the Gobi. A few had been provided with linens, shoes, and blankets by the army. And with simple tents.

Here and there, people of the same nations had grouped together. Bai Jun saw the tent city of the European Union, the Indians, the Japanese, the Brazilians. At first, he had told his people to remove the flags. This was China; no flag was to be flown here other than the gold-emblazoned red cloth.

But then the fantasy flags had appeared: the white flags with the blue planet, and in its center the Gobi, where a silvery star twinkled; the black flag with the Milky Way from whose star arm the oversized sun shone. The blue flag with the stretched-out human arm that held its hand towards a lizard-like claw.

Bai Jun had finally let them have their way.

“Like an army camp,” he heard the general secretary mumble.

“Dreamers,” Bai Jun replied. “And I can hardly order dreams to be shot at.”

“Certainly a defect of the target recognition devices.”

“Rather, a software problem,” the general answered.

They left the camp behind and passed through the restricted military zone. The guards saluted them in amazement upon recognizing the general secretary.

“Where to?” asked Yi.

Bai Jun pointed at the hills. The jeeps worked their way up the rocky slope. By the time the vehicles reached the ridge, the sun was already low.

They got out. The warmth of the rock was greater than the warmth of the sun in those minutes. Bai Jun could feel it through the soles of his boots. The plain below them stretched to the horizon. A certain but not precisely definable area of the plain looked like a pane of dark, smooth metal: the Juyan salt lake.

On the shore of the lake, something like a larger-than-life drop of water shimmered, across which the reflecting light glistened almost incessantly—the radiant dome that Rhodan had erected over the *Stardust* with the help of Arkonide technology.

The faraway thunder of the explosions seemed out of sync with the flashing lights due to the distance.

“So, the *Stardust* has launched again,” said the general secretary. “Who was on board?”

“We don’t know.”

Their visitor nodded. “May I know what you really think about Rhodan?” he asked casually, lighting another cigarillo. Blue lotus, Bai Jun saw. It smelled faintly of sweet leather.

This quiet man in his unadorned suit, doubtlessly tailored, seemed out of place, almost surreal in their current surroundings. *Like a lost branch manager of a quiet bank,* Bai Jun thought.

Aloud, he said, “Rhodan inspires the people.”

“I guess that’s not a compliment.” Again, the sentence hung between question and statement.

Bai Jun didn’t know whether to respond. “Many people are yearning for inspiration,” he finally continued.

The general secretary took a puff, inhaled, exhaled, and contemplated the thin thread of smoke as if it contained the greatest mystery in the world. “I’m afraid so. Isn’t it strange how much difficulty most people have with living in the here and now? They listen for faraway sounds. They want to feel a calling. They long for prophets, proclaimers, redeemers. Will Rhodan redeem them?”

Bai Jun weighed his words. He knew both life stories of the general secretary. According to his official biography, Huang Hai-Jie was a man of the common people, born in the countryside near Shenyang, son of an unknown migrant worker and a seamstress who made shirts in a factory for a European fashion company. He rose to prominence with cleverness and hard work. His early engagement for the city’s street children; the night shelters he founded for them of his own initiative and with his own means, where he and soon the volunteers of his Golden Horde served; his first appearance as a young deputy in front of the three thousand members of the National People’s Congress; his rigorous reckoning; his clear-sighted analysis of the obvious and, more piercingly, the hidden deficits of the party.

“The vivisection of a party,” the media had called it.

He was the first Chinese political star to come out of the Evernet, as it was called abroad. His “Golden Horde” was an ever-growing crowd of young people who followed him and started recording his words—on their pods, in their paper notebooks—which they showcased on their headbands and T-shirts.

Then his hesitant yet inexorable rise to power within a year; his election to the State Council; his alliance with the old prime minister, Chen Lin, who publicly called him *Zi* (son) and he in turn called her—how homey!—Mama Lin.

But Bai Jun was also familiar with the unofficial version that the Zhon Chan Er Bu, the military secret service, had uncovered and, of course, kept under wraps for years. According to that story, Huang Hai-Jie had, in fact, been born in the north, but in one of the suburbs, as they'd been built in the 2020s. His mother was indeed from Shenyang, but she wasn't a seamstress. She was a party secretary. His father was a high party official who, although never formally recognizing his son, had supported him throughout his life.

Huang Hai-Jie had lived with his mother in a comfortable condo in Shenyang. And there, on the left bank of the Hun River, he had grown up. His mother had died when he was thirteen (they had never conclusively determined why). The Zhong Chan Er Bu didn't consider it impossible that the mother, after several failed relationships and lost or aborted children, had tried to blackmail Hai-Jie's father and fallen victim to this attempt herself. Hai-Jie's biological father was long dead; he would no longer provide any information.

Additionally, Hai-Jie hadn't started out founding the night shelters and then recruited volunteers. Rather, he'd surrounded himself with his Golden Horde before there was any thought of setting up the shelters.

He provided his Golde Horde with "yaba," as methamphetamine was known in their part of the world. His followers inhaled the stuff or administered it to each other rectally. Afterwards, they no longer thought about sleep but spiraled into euphoria by reciting quotes from their idol, experiencing a notable increase in their erotic desires, which unfortunately corresponded to a notable decrease in sexual performance.

In no time, they'd become addicted to yaba; without the drug, they felt lethargic, listless, miserable. Huang Hai-Jie gave them what they craved, and he gave it with open hands. And the Golden Horde worshipped him like a redeemer.

Bai Jun had long since ceased to believe either of the two versions. He was sure that the general secretary had also launched the second infamous biography. Why? That was something to find out at the next opportunity.

“If Rhodan will redeem them?” he asked the general secretary. “What should he redeem them from? They’re living a good life—a better life than a hundred generations before them.”

“Well, I’m afraid humans aren’t like that. They aren’t content. Happiness is repugnant to them.” He took another puff. “Better to stumble slightly on new paths than to tread water on old ones, as they say.”

“The rich man thinks of the future, the poor man of the present.”

The general secretary laughed quietly. It was a surprisingly boyish laugh, jaunty and mocking. He puffed again.

Yi brought a pair of binoculars over from the jeep. The general secretary took them and observed the energy dome. Bai Jun knew what he’d see: a mechanical landscape where machines built machines, houses, halls, and funnels that presumably led to the depths of the Gobi.

The fortress of the Arkonides. His people hadn’t seen a single human since the departure of the *Stardust.* Possibly a move by Rhodan to entice them into a cease-fire.

Hai-Jie passed the binoculars on to He Jian-Dong. “If I see it correctly, our artillery fire is fizzling out futilely against the dome. There’s no point in continuing like that, unless we want to demonstrate to our clients or even just the spectators on the Evernet the teeth of our Hu.”

Bai Jun had to grin. Few of their external clients knew that Hu meant “tiger.” Nowadays, the Chinese Hu of the nationally owned Norinco helped the Brazilians to maintain their dominance over their South American neighbors, and at the U.S.—Mexican border, the Hu were facing the decrepit M1 Abrams.

The Chinese tiger roams the globe. But in our own country, it has a rough time with a force field.

“We won’t break through the dome,” he admitted. “But that’s not our intention. We will break the people hiding inside it.”

“Indeed,” his guest said in a drawl.

Bai Jun looked briefly over his shoulder. The general secretary’s bodyguards and adjutants were standing in different groups some meters apart from each other. The four members of the Golden Horde had their eyes on him.

He nodded to them and smiled. He felt He Jian-Dong watching him and noticed that his adjutant stood somewhat closer to the general secretary than to him.

Our talking bodies, he thought disappointedly.

“What if the people under the dome are just as tough as the dome itself?” the general secretary asked in his floaty tone.

Bai Jun realized that the man hadn’t hesitated to be driven onto this ridge, even though it was quite unclear whether the Americans —and the alien Taikonauts—possessed offensive weapons. They couldn’t make for a better target than by standing up here, exposed to all eyes and defenseless.

“Nobody can remain tough forever,” Bai Jun answered. “The noise must disrupt their sleep. And there is no more effective poison than sleep deprivation.”

The other man nodded. “A few days of sleep deprivation and our guests under the dome will behave like lunatics. Let’s hope they didn’t bring back any alien weapons as souvenirs from the Moon. I wouldn’t want to see those in the hands of maniacs.”

Bai Jun swallowed the reproval.

“We can cease firing at any time,” He Jian-Dong offered. “You have the high command.”

The general secretary didn’t answer.

“Firing from the Types is by no means our last option,” Bai Jun added. “The air force has already provided fighter bombers that I can easily retrieve from Hohhot Airport.”

“I know,” said Huang Hai-Jie with a smile, continuing to puff on the remains of his cigarillo.

Of course you know.

The general secretary looked at the last embers of the tobacco. He dropped the butt into the gravel and ground it underfoot. “There are many options. I’m expecting a convoy of old Russian trucks any day. At the wheel will be some fat oligarchs and a couple of lightly dressed middle-class Muscovites. The loading area is full of gold bullions and jewels and euros and Fabergé eggs, to see how high Rhodan’s price is.”

He Jian-Dong laughed unreasonably loudly at the joke.

“Do you think he can be bought?” asked Bai Jun.

“Who couldn’t?” Hai-Jie wondered.

“You?”

“Oh,” said the general secretary.

A breeze blew up from the lake. Bai Jun wondered if the air really tasted that salty or if he was imagining it.

“If I can be bought?” their guest continued. “Let me think. A Fabergé or two might indeed tempt me. Have you ever seen the egg with the Trans-Siberian Railway? The locomotive made of platinum, rubies as headlights, the wagon windows of crystal. There’s a wagon *For Ladies Only,* one for non-smokers, and one for smokers. And for the Russian soul and its salvation, at the end is a wagon patterned after an Orthodox chapel: Christos and his blessed travel company on wheels. To wind up the train mechanism, there’s a golden key.” He tidied his hair, which the breeze had slightly messed up. “What kind of key might Rhodan have found on the Moon?”

Again, a questionless question. Bai Jun shook his head slowly.

“You mean, general, that he can’t be bought?” Hai-Jie asked. Bai Jun shrugged. “If we only knew what the Arkonides offered him.”

“Maybe it wasn’t the Arkonides who offered him something. Perhaps it was he who offered something to them,” Bai Jun speculated.

His adjutant laughed out loud. “What could the American have offered them? Free entry to Disneyland?”

The general secretary laughed along cheerfully. “Yes,” he said. He winked at the adjutant conspiratorially. “But then wouldn’t it have been more practical to land in California right away?”

The adjutant swallowed. “Yes,” he admitted. “That would have been the easier way.”

Bai Jun would have liked to leave He Jian-Dong to stew in this awkward situation a little longer. But the shadow of the embarrassment fell on him. The general secretary couldn’t help but think, *What kind of simple-minded person did Bai Jun choose as his adjutant?* At the same time, he wished he could defend the young man and pull him out of the sphere of power.

“Maybe Rhodan is following his own stratagem,” he suggested.

The general secretary leaned forward with interest. “That is to say?”

“Let’s call it Rhodan’s stratagem. Let the world fall into divisiveness, and then collect the pieces.”

The other man smiled wryly. “Divide the world even more than it already is? Disunite it even more than our friends in India and Pakistan, Brazil and Mexico, the European Union and northern Africa have already managed to do? That would be an ambitious effort indeed. And doesn’t that contradict his call for unity? *Come to Terrania.* They have come and they are still coming, aren’t they?”

“Yes. And if I’m not mistaken, it’s not only the spiritualists and dreamers but also the dedicated ones. Dozens if not hundreds of physicists, biologists, engineers, and architects who are hoping for the great leap forward with Rhodan or the Arkonide technology. The solution to their mysteries, the opening of fantastic

opportunities. A new world. New mysteries."

Huang Hai-Jie said something, as if speaking to himself, so quietly that Bai Jun only became aware of the words a moment later.

"New mysteries," the general secretary repeated thoughtfully. "Of course. At the same time, we all have our mysteries."

You certainly do, he thought.

"And we unflinchingly believe that we don't share them with anyone," continued the general secretary. "Certain preferences we'd prefer not to see exhibited in public. Secret pleasures, like peeing in the bathtub under the foam. Reading death notices with a hint of malicious joy."

Attention, Bai Jun reminded himself, *be very careful now.* It became dangerous when power acted confidentially. He gave his adjutant a discreet sign: *keep totally still.*

Huang Hai-Jie said, "The concealed family stories. Our lost fathers."

Unlike you, I don't have a lost father.

"Our sisters in Tainan."

Bai Jun felt something inside him freeze. *How in the world...*

The general secretary waved him closer with his free hand. Bai Jun followed as if pulled by wires.

"Our sister," Hai-Jie whispered, "to whom we sent a very quiet, very secret recommendation to spend this or that week with friends in Brazil or, why not, near Atlanta. So that, whatever she does, she won't be in or near Tainan or any other big city that weekend—neither she nor her young daughter. Nor this *Fan* with whom she incomprehensibly mated."

He even knows about that, Bai Jun thought, distressed. *And maybe he thinks I consider it a disgrace that Shuman has a child with a Fan.*

He didn't share these old prejudices against the natives of the island state. But apparently, the general secretary was getting at something else entirely.

"You should keep away from all cities with missile defense bases that could, who knows, be targeted by whomever."

"I understand," Bai Jun said in a voice unknown to him. "To whom will you transfer my command?"

"Your command?" Hai-Jie laughed quietly. "To whom should I transfer it? Who of all those eligible wouldn't have a sister in Tainan who needs to be given a hint? No brother in Taipeh? No cousin-in-law in Suao? Who among us could resist the temptation to save someone we've set our heart on?"

They were now standing almost shoulder to shoulder. Bai Jun had always behaved reservedly towards the general secretary and the cult around him. He had always had only contempt for the Golden Horde. Suddenly, reluctantly and almost painfully, he felt the burden that the general secretary had taken upon himself: one and a half billion lives heavy.

Hai-Jie was more than the cult around him. He was the most powerful man in China, and therefore the most powerful man on Earth. Possibly only the prime minister of India, the new tsar of Great Russia, or the president of the United States even came close to him.

"You've been to Tainan twice," the general secretary said. Question or statement?

"Three times," Bai Jun corrected. "Incognito, I thought."

"Respect. I was only told about two of those times. Your brother-in-law is a Fan."

Bai Jun nodded. "Yumin would prefer the designation *Atayal.*"

"A *brave man,*" translated the general secretary. "Is his face tattooed?" Bai Jun nodded. "How did he earn that? Did he bring home the head of an enemy?"

“No. A doctorate in economics.”

“It’s hard to say which one is more gruesome.”

Against his will, Bai Jun had to laugh. The stars appeared as if out of nowhere, unconcealed by Earthly light.

“Head hunters and facial tattoos. A world unto itself. The island of the Fan. But one day we Han came and pushed back the mountain people. That was the end of an independent culture.”

“They’re living in autonomous regions today.”

“Autonomous regions? How nice for the Atayal and the other Shandi.” Their guest tilted his head back. “Would you like to fly to the stars, General? Into the purple forbidden area of the sky? To the Cowherd’s Star? To the Blue Dragon of the East?”

“Yes.”

“Rhodan offers us the key,” he replied. “We’d be fools not to take it, wouldn’t we?”

“Perhaps,” said Bai Jun cautiously.

“I imagine it to be wonderful,” the general secretary said in a raised voice. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful? If, from the Earth, from here, from the Gobi, gigantic starships were launched? Dragon ships made of new steel, driven by new machines, shrouded in shields that enabled them to sail through the coronas of suns as though through an ocean of light? To see the black holes and quasars not only as calculations on paper, but directly in front of us, on our way into the depths of the galaxy?”

Bai Jun hesitated. Then suddenly the general secretary exclaimed, “Do you think I don’t want all of that? Do you think I’m an idiot?”

It took Bai Jun several breaths to get his heart rate back under control. The last time somebody had yelled at him, it had been a comrade at the military academy. And Bai Jun had made sure it truly was the last time.

“I don’t think you’re an idiot,” he said as calmly as possible. “I never did.”

“Hm,” Hai-Jie continued. “But you think that I want to destroy Rhodan—Rhodan and his key to the stars. Why would I want that? Because he was rude enough to land in the Gobi without permission? Because I have an aversion towards American pilots? So why, General, do I want you to finally crack that bloody dome?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“Then perhaps you should consult your brother-in-law,” the other recommended with unexpected sharpness. “Ask him what the Fan or Shandi felt when they saw the first Han boat arrive through the Taiwan Strait.” He pointed at the starry sky. “How promising they found this arrival. What a future lay waiting for them in that ship. And there was indeed a future in those ships. But what sort? Bai Jun, do you want you or your sister with her daughter to be allowed to live in an autonomous area one day? To your benefit, set up by the Arkonides who’ll be sitting in Tainan and in Taipeh, in Bejing and Shanghai, in Moscow and Washington?”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“No,” said Hai-Jie. “Suppose we don’t allow ourselves to fight back. We don’t defend our territory, our people. Then we don’t force the Arkonides to shoot at us again. At our soldiers, our civilians, our people. Then we don’t have to order a line of refrigerated vehicles to accommodate the bodies, bring the dead to their families and tell them, ‘They’ve opened fire—unfortunately, even against orders—to defend their land.’”

Bai Jun remained silent.

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” the general secretary repeated. “But suppose the Arkonides want it to be that way and they come and land not with a single one of their superior spaceships, but with an armada? Will you prevent it, General? With what? With a couple of thousand Hu tanks?”

Bai Jun shook his head.

“What lies there with Rhodan under the dome is a promise, Bai Jun. But unfortunately, it’s also the greatest danger that has threatened us and that has ever threatened the Earth, boundless and unforeseeable. General, I am not speaking here for the CP, not even for China alone. What lies there is beyond our imagining. What guarantee do we have that the American pilot, who is without a doubt a brilliant pilot, remains the master of the situation?”

“What do you suggest?”

The general secretary had declared his readiness to take a chance on a conflict with the Americans, with NATO, to conquer Taiwan, the island of the Fan. The Arkonide knowledge and technology were definitely worth more than Taiwan. And to top it all, wasn’t he right? Hadn’t Rhodan, for better or worse, handed over humanity to the Arkonides, of whom humans knew next to nothing?

At that, Hai-Jie laughed quietly again. “If your driver—what was his name?”

“Yi Khedrub,” Bai Jun told him, surprised that he had remembered the man.

“A Sino-Tibetan, isn’t he? If Yi could catapult his phurba with magic powers through the dome, that would be of great help to us. But I’m afraid the gods won’t help us this time. No magic dagger will save us.”

“You mean we should move forward with a nuclear attack.”

“It would be the logical course of action.”

“It could be our last trump card.”

“What good is a trump card if not played?”

“How will we look if the dome resists the bomb?”

The general secretary pulled out a piece of paper from a pocket inside his jacket. He unfolded it and handed it to Bai Jun. “One of our lunar satellites took this picture.”

A scene of destruction. The shredded fragments of a giant spherical body, like the metallic peels of an orange torn open by a tiger.

"The Arkonide spaceship?" The other man nodded. "It looks as if it's been destroyed from the inside. Self-destruction?"

"Unlikely. We're detecting extremely high radiation levels. Someone—Russians or Americans—managed, in some way, to smuggle a nuclear bomb on board. And they detonated it. Let's hope they destroyed the ship quickly and completely, before it was able to call for help."

Bai Jun handed the photo back to him. "Give me some more time," he requested.

Huang Hai-Jie rubbed his chin. It sounded scratchy. "It's been a long day; I wouldn't mind a little personal hygiene."

"My tent is at your disposal." After all the feigned or real confidences, the statement sounded oddly abstract.

"Give me one more argument, General, and I'll give you a couple of days."

"Let's at least wait until the *Stardust* is back. Rhodan will have to open the dome for the ship or the crew or whatever they're bringing back from the Moon."

The general secretary nodded. "I'll see you then. A couple of days." He still didn't sound convinced.

"We'll try something else." Bai Jun offered a slight smile.

"I'll be glad to listen to your suggestions."

"I have reason to fear that you're not the only one listening to me. Extraterrestrial technology surpasses our understanding. But it shouldn't surpass our prudence."

"I may still hope that we're talking (or not talking) about something other than a magic dagger."

“Something quite different,” Bai Jun confirmed. “Let me keep my little secrets in this case. I don’t share them with anybody.” He smiled apologetically at his adjutant.

“You don’t share them with anybody until the appropriate time,” the general secretary clarified.

“Of course,” Bai Jun replied. “Thank you!”

Once the plane carrying Huang Hai-Jie was out of sight, Bai Jun asked his adjutant to come into the command tent for a word.

“It’s been a hard day. It won’t take long.”

“I’m not tired,” He Jian-Dong insisted. “Don’t you find the general secretary inspiring? The clarity of his analysis...”

“Oh, yes, absolutely. It was very instructive.”

Yi drove them home. Bai felt exhausted, almost numb, as if the Gobi had drained him of all liquids. He yawned as he got out. Then he looked back into the jeep and nodded at the driver.

“Please come into the tent for a moment as well,” he told him.

Yi Khedrub switched off the electric engine, removed the key, and swung his legs out. Standing, he adjusted his phurba and followed the general, who was walking ahead into the command tent.

Bai Jun switched on a floor lamp. He took a few steps into the depths of the tent which now, in the dim light of the lamp, seemed immensely large.

The general turned to the two men who had come to a halt directly next to the lamp. “Yi,” he said, “please come a little closer.”

The Sino-Tibetan came and stood a shoulder’s length away from the general.

“You know that I hold you in high esteem,” Bai Jun said,

addressing his adjutant across the four or five meters between them. “More than any other person. You’re loyal, smart, and reliable.”

“Thank you,” said He Jian-Dong uncomfortably.

“I’d appreciate it very much if, in this situation and in the days ahead, I could count on all of those traits. I wasn’t aware of how much you revered the general secretary.”

“Who doesn’t?” the younger man replied.

“Rightly so, rightly so,” murmured the general. “He’s a far-sighted man.” The other nodded. “And we should try to be too. Far-sighted. Maybe now we even have to show a little more far-sightedness than the general secretary himself. After all,”—he winked, at which the adjutant guessed more than he actually saw —“he’s not infallible, like the Pope in the Holy Sea of Christians.”

He Jian-Dong nodded.

Bai Jun continued, “What I’m getting at is this: the general secretary knows, of course, about our tunnel construction. His people have inspected everything, haven’t they?” Another nod. “I suppose he didn’t come to us without plans of his own.”

“The nuclear strike,” guessed the adjutant.

“Exactly. But I don’t consider this nuclear strike a far-sighted solution.”

“The general secretary has been persuaded by your arguments.”

“Maybe.” he took two steps towards the adjutant. “I ask you to reinforce the team in the tunnels.”

“When? Tonight?”

“Right now. Reinforce the brigade and let them look for an atomic warhead, likely not well-hidden. Send some specialists too, who might be able to disarm it. Take only men we absolutely trust. The general secretary is a man who is used to having his way.”

Bai Jun watched the hand of his adjutant slide up to the service weapon in his belt. He stood there, unmoving.

“I know that you have a tough decision to make now. I don’t want to pressure you. I won’t order you to do anything. You’re not a coward. You won’t fulfill my request just because you know, or can count on, the fact that neither you nor I nor many others here, soldiers, but also countless civilians, would survive such an explosion.

“The general secretary is not a murderer.”

“Oh, nobody will suggest that. After such a nuclear catastrophe, people will assume that, unfortunately, Rhodan didn’t master the alien technology as well as he should have. You know how subtly our government spokespeople can be with their wording. ‘A regrettable accident.’ Condolences will be offered to the U.S. and the many relatives of the foreign victims. There’ll be condolences for our own families as well, your parents in Shanghai and so on, and they’ll be given ample financial resources to help overcome their grief.”

“I’m not convinced,” said He Jian-Dong deliberately, and he pulled his weapon. He weighed it in his hand rather than aiming it.

Bai Jun turned his head a little. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Yi’s phurba detaching itself from his belt without the driver having to use a hand. The three-cornered dagger slid silently forward, directly to He Jian-Dong. Not a finger’s width from the young man’s forehead, it stopped and hung motionless in the air.

The adjutant, who had followed everything like a dream, breathed deeply and noisily. “Pok Kai,” he cursed.

“I warned you,” said the general.

“This is treason.”

“Treason? That’s a hard word to define when times change. And who wants to deny that a new era has begun? A lot’s going to change. We should be far-sighted, Jian-Dong, and curious. And once

we've been pulverized by nuclear devices, we won't get to see this new world. Wouldn't that be a shame?"

The adjutant put his revolver back in its holster. "Yes," he said. "It would be a shame."

"So you'll do what I asked you to?"

He Jian-Dong nodded. The dagger swiveled around and returned to Yi's hand, where he plucked it out of the air.

The general went to his companion and looked him in the eye for a moment. "I have a pile of money, you know. Some land, a couple of shares. Some tubes of Krugerrand and the like. Nothing to call a man's legacy. But I don't want to make my last exit without a legacy. And I can't think of anybody to succeed me other than you. Do you understand?"

He Jian-Dong nodded. "I'll make an effort." He left the tent.

"Thank you," said the general softly.

Yi bowed his head, smiling.

Part 5

Ernst Ellert

June 27 until July 6, 2036

Over the Roofs of Munich

On Friday, June 27, 2036, shortly after half past eight, Ernst Ellert stepped onto his roof terrace. The evening was warm. From Feilitzstraße, a fragrant mixture drifted over, the intermingling aromas of Indian, Japanese, Mongolian, Chechen, and Russian takeaways, the tiny pizzerias, gyros, and pancake stations, curry, horseradish, and garlic, vinegar and oregano, ras el hanout, and maple syrup. Very posh.

Down on the street, a cleaning robot had gotten stuck between two cars and couldn't move either forward or backwards. At times, it crashed against the blue Brilliance Xíng on one side, then against the ancient Mahindra pick-up on the other. Its electric motor did its best, but it couldn't leave a lasting impression on the two vehicles.

The robot was a German model, at least.

Ellert grinned. An image of symbolic radiance: the native machine, stuck between the products of the current rulers of the planet, China and India.

From Leopoldstraße, the wailing sirens of a police car or ambulance echoed. *Heat strokes,* thought Ellert. Too many people went out without cooling umbrellas or thermal textiles. The summer weighed heavily on the land.

He swallowed. What if the emergency wasn't a heat stroke but rather the very thing he'd told Walt about?

His pod gonged. The noise was soft, like that of a copper singing bowl. But it was Walter.

“Walt here. I’m coming later. Am I the last?”

“You’d be the first if you came now.”

“Do you want to know why I’m late?”

“Hm-m,” Ellert replied, leaving the other man to interpret it as either agreement or disagreement.

“Okay. Because it’s an incredible story.”

“There are no incredible stories,” murmured Ellert.

Below, the human guardian of the cleaning robot came strolling over. His bright orange security vest seemed to pulsate quietly, like an outer heart. He bit thoughtfully into a pita and watched the machine struggle to turn. Then he fumbled the controls out of his pocket and operated it single-handedly. The robot made a couple of turns and slid out of the trap between the two cars on the sidewalk —a danger zone for its simple control brain. Not so for the guardian.

A tall, skinny lady jumped out of the robot’s way. She wore a bikini whose upper and lower parts were connected by a kind of tinsel. She was walking an enormous Borzoi. Or was it the other way around? Indeed, she looked more like her dog’s appendage.

She cursed in Russian. The robot’s caretaker only tapped his cap in greeting and directed the machine back to the street.

The doorbell rang. Ellert went inside, pulled the door to the roof terrace shut behind him, and opened the apartment door. It was Maud and her royal household. She was holding a bottle of Colinade in each hand and waved them triumphantly.

In her wake, women dressed as stewardesses stormed the apartment. Behind them, four or five men entered, dressed in black suits, with gold foil caps on their heads.

Ellert went into the kitchen to see how the stove was doing. Everything was fine. The heat of it mingled with the sweltering warmth of the evening.

Again the doorbell rang. He left the reception of the second group of guests to Maud. When he next entered the living room, it had already filled up. KaHe dabbed the sweat from his high forehead with a white cloth and talked about not looking for a spider in every soup. Nilyfer Amboser had brought her bonobo; the monkey looked visibly uncomfortable in the green lederhosen. Nilyfer put a toy into the animal's hands that looked like a yellow rubber duck. Some boys had put on karaoke masks and were singing old tunes by Tokio Hotel, Take That, and Workingman's Death.

Maud, standing by the terrace door, made a desperate face; he didn't understand why. Then she winked at him confidentially.

A young Han with a bob and a monocle laughed excitedly and gave Ellert an undeserved, wet kiss on the cheek in passing. "Everything's going nicely," she said, and he couldn't discern whether it was a question or an answer.

He nodded politely, but she was already gone; only her perfume lingered in the air, impregnated with nature-like pheromones.

Everything's going nicely. But going nicely nowhere, he thought.

KaHe came up behind him, wanting to know if Walter was coming.

"He's coming, but later," Ellert told him. "Something strange happened to him."

"I see," said KaHe as he sipped a glass of Filu e Ferru that he'd brought and poured himself, full of mistrust towards the other guests' tastes.

Somebody had switched on the screen on the wall without activating the sound. Ellert saw a commercial where a shrill Tyrannosaurus rex held his snout far out of the 3-D field, baring spotlessly clean teeth. A talking toothbrush whose face was the spitting image of the current health minister jumped out of the sink and up onto the saurian tongue—did dinosaurs even have tongues?—and praised a tube of Shé & Chi. Meanwhile, the Tyrannosaur

stared both melancholically and guiltily into the void. Ellert knew the commercial by heart. The giant lizard was sorry that this magic Chinese toothpaste hadn't been available in its day; if only it had been, the extinction of the dinosaurs might have been delayed. A real hoot.

Somebody was flipping through channels with the remote. Ellert saw images of a tennis match flit through the 3-D display, interrupted by an obscene pirate flash that some of the guests applauded lively. *Click*. This year an even bigger Jagganath could be seen rolling from Trafalgar through the streets of London, once again the most impressive, most colorful, and therefore holiest procession float of the local Hindu community, followed by—*click*—a performance of the German foreign minister sitting next to the mummy-like president of Mexico.

El Presidente looked right past the camera with glassy eyes. The foreign minister was probably announcing that Germany would stand by the Mexican government in a display of unbreakable loyalty during the next phase of the drug war, to the benefit of all those who were sober. El Presidente, whose eyes were yellowing and clouding after years of using hero/3, nodded rapturously at that.

Then again——*click*—back to the Jagganath. The British prime minister held up a bowl of sura, milk fermented by honey. General jubilations in the streets of London. He put it to his lips, which reminded Ellert of something.

The food.

When he stepped out of the kitchen and declared the buffet open, he found that Walter had arrived. The young Chinese woman with the monocle was tousling his hair. Walter seemed to be uncertain whether he liked it or not.

Ellert nodded at him over the heads of the other guests. The armchairs and sofas were overflowing like the lifeboats of the *Titanic*. The roof terrace had long since been seized by refugees from the main room. The guests sat, stood, squatted, or lay wherever there was space.

“Glad you’re here,” a female voice breathed into his ear.

“I live here,” he explained, and turned around.

“Oh!” Maud’s front shone with sweat, almost invisible droplets decorating her upper lip. Her breath smelled of Colinade, bittersweet. Her lips would be sticky with sugar. “How could I forget that?”

“Too much Colinade,” he guessed.

A few minutes later, Walter made his way over. What had happened to him? Ellert already knew; he had seen a young man who’d fallen off the shoulders of the Walking Man and injured himself badly.

The siren. The ambulance, remembered Ellert. *It was a regular emergency after all.*

Walter looked at him gravely. “Just as you predicted.”

He handed Ellert a bottle wrapped in light packing paper. Ellert unrolled the paper and weighed the bottle in his hand.

“Redbreast,” he said appreciatively. Then he shook his head. “Such carelessness. That was bound to happen one day.”

The seventeen-meter-high, monumental statue by Borofsky that had been standing on Leopoldstraße for forty years had always enticed people into tests of courage.

“In the spacesuit of an American astronaut,” Walter added. “Also just as you predicted.” Ellert nodded. “He wanted to tie a banner around the head of the Walking Man.”

“What was written on it?”

“You know already. Don’t you?”

Walter watched him. Ellert shrugged.

Walter murmured something, took the Irish whiskey in his hand,

and brought it into the kitchen. Soon after, he came back carrying two glasses. Both were filled just a finger's breadth with an amber-colored liquid. The whiskey smelled bulky and heavy, almost like sherry.

Ellert let it act upon his tongue and his palate, as was customary, before drinking it in tiny sips. Spicy and soft, an elegant smoke. He nodded to Walter, and the other man raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"So?"

"On the finish, maybe a hint of oak," said Ellert. "Caramel? And a tiny bit of pepper."

Walter shook his head disapprovingly. "That's not what I meant. Your dreams. Maybe we should look into your dreams one day after all."

In the past, he had resolved to not fill other people in anymore. Why had he broken his word with Walter, of all people!

Time went by. Ellert noticed that it had become quieter in the room. But it was way too early for the great acoustic ebb in the late phase of a party, when the guests grews tired and needed support, and looked for protection in each other's bodies against the dull coolness of the night.

Ellert saw that almost everyone was looking into the 3-D display. Yet the image was far from spectacular. It showed the scraggy gray-brown desert land, and in it the U.S. spaceship which, for some reason, had landed there.

Or crashed?

Or been shot down?

Chinese tanks rolled and heaved over the rubble. From three sides, they were bearing down on the *Stardust*.

"A matter for General Bai," said Sebastian Jansen.

The reporter, one of Ellert's colleagues, was the only representative of the German media to whom Bai Jun had ever given an interview. Ellert knew Jansen's assessment of the general: an outstanding strategist, smart, self-confident, daring, grandiose, but still honorable, a military man with a penchant for games. Maybe even for acting. A rake.

"In the old James Bond movies, he would have made a wonderful villain," Jansen said. "But he has a few more dimensions than a typical screen hero. A classy guy. Just the man I'd send to negotiate with defectors."

Ellert tried to picture one or another of those dimensions Jansen was thinking of.

The reporter took one of the cranes from the open cabinet, one of the 1:87 models that Ellert had collected: Herpa, Brekina, Schuco, Siku, Wiking, and a few other brands.

"Careful with that!" someone shouted. "Those are Ernst's treasures."

The speaker was a certain Michael who called himself Mikael. Or the other way round. And to Ellert, he said, "Isn't it true that you earned your degree with this, boy? As a crane operator?"

"It's still true," grunted Ellert, combing his moustache with his middle three fingers. "The past probably won't change either."

Jansen gently put the model of the rescue crane back into the cabinet under Ellert's supervision. Ellert nodded to him thankfully.

Maud had stepped up behind him again. She grabbed his wrists with her cool fingers. Her breath brushed his cheek. He felt the relief of her body and her warmth being transmitted to him. He tilted his head back softly and touched her front with the back of his neck. She was breathing more heavily than a moment ago.

"Do you believe it?" she whispered in his ear.

"That the Americans have deserted?" He laughed quietly. "Why not? A big part of the United States already belongs to China. That

so-called financial colonialism. The Renminbi Empire. What used to be the gunboats are now the yuán."

Maud didn't respond to that and asked again, "Do you believe it? Do these aliens exist?"

"Yes," he said.

Yet *believe* was not the right word at all. He had *known*. Even before the first stations had mentioned the rumor. Even before the *Stardust* had landed in the Gobi. And if he was being completely honest, he'd known even before Rhodan had found what he was looking for on the Moon.

Ellert had seen the strangers' ship crash in his white dreams.

She sat cross-legged next to him on the sofa. The fabric of her pants stretched across her legs and revealed the finest contours, the landscape of her knee.

“Where are you now?” asked Maud. She ran the tip of her index finger over his temple, as if looking for his thoughts.

Where was he? He grimaced.

“If I were on my way to India,” said Maud, “I might have a chance of finding you. At the farthest end of Patagonia. But like this?” She had added a bit of melancholy to her smile and waited to see if it worked.

It didn’t. So she unfolded her legs, stood up, picked up her jacket from the floor in passing, threw it over her shoulder, and left without saying goodbye.

“Nice,” said Walt, slowly resurfacing from the armchair he had sunken into. “Nice girl.” Ellert nodded. “Why are you letting her go?”

Ellert shook his head wordlessly and thought of Inken, something he’d tried to prevent.

He had met Inken in Berchtesgaden during his research on a period when the village was still the capital of a small, independent religious state: the Prince-Provostry. The War of the Oxen, the Counter-Reformation under Notthafft von Weißenstein, who chased the toy carvers out of the country—Ellert had dug deeper and deeper into the history of a place that even most history buffs knew little of (other than that it had served the Führer and Reich Chancellor as a branch office of the Reich government; the butcher of Europe on the terrace, his gaze directed at the rock formations of the Alps—the usual pictures).

Ellert had always, even as a schoolboy in Schwabing, searched for something like refuge in the depths of history. While his classmates pulled the pods from their pockets and flirted virtually with girls in Tokyo—maybe the girls themselves were only virtual

as well—in Cairo or Shanghai, he'd taken his notes with a pencil stub on paper.

One day, he had dreamed of a woman; a dream in a snowy landscape, the whole world washed out as if with Wite-Out, only a single figure sitting under the bone-colored parasol, the smooth glass of colorless elderberry spritzer in front of her, and below the colorless shade of the Königssee.

"I'm not an apparition," she had said, and laughed. "Don't look at me all aghast. Why don't you sit down?"

And in his dream, he had sat down next to her and had smelled her coastal blond hair that smelled of salt and rain.

Two days later, he'd seen her again. High above the Königssee, under the parasol, the glass of elderberry spritzer again in front of her. He had stared at her.

"I'm not an apparition," she had repeated and laughed again. "Why don't you sit down?"

Her name was Inken.

He had written her old-fashioned letters to Kühlungsborn—letters on paper, the kind you shouldn't write, full of intimate and far-reaching promises, garlands of compliments, entreaties, and devotions of the soul. Three months later, they'd moved in together. She, the mechanical engineer from Rostock, had had no trouble finding a job in Munich.

Then he'd seen her in another white dream: her ancient Saab between two trucks, crushed and smashed, her broken body on the highway to Rostock; the emergency physician slowly pulling on his cigarette; the fireman approaching him with weightless, somehow bouncy steps and looking at him the way one would look into a camera.

"You can't drive," he had told her, revealing everything about his white dreams, his age-old secret, to her.

She had smiled at him. "That's why you studied history? Because

you have disturbing visions of the future? Honestly?"

"Well, my name's Ernst," he had desperately joked—desperately because he'd realized that she'd taken the situation as a joke as well.

"Let me drive you," he had offered. "At least let me drive. Don't drive alone."

But she'd been so full of faith in the machines, in the wakeup signals of the trucks, their electronic distance meters and autonomous braking systems, and the GPS that watched over European humanity from orbit; so full of mockery for his old-fashioned Bavarian superstition, which she found endearing, but to which she would not concede any power over her plans.

"I'll call you when I get there," she'd said.

Immediately after she left, he had sat down in the kitchen and put his pod on the table. At 4.15 p.m. it had sounded a notification.

Inken's brother had written, "The pilot dozed off and the distance meter failed, as did the braking system. No one can be that unlucky."

At around three in the morning, the three of them sat on the roof terrace. Ellert lay on a plastic couch; Walt and KaHe sat on wooden folding chairs.

The night was mild and cloudless. Ellert had extended the star canopy. The transparent photoactive sheet covering the stakes enhanced the remaining light from the stars. With his hands folded behind his neck, he searched for the Big Dipper, found it, went from there via the Little Dipper to the celestial W shape of Cassiopeia, and then on to Andromeda. Even the Milky Way passing through Cassiopeia was clearly visible despite the stray light of the city.

"You wanted to give me the pod contact of this attractive Han," said Walt, running his hand through his hair as if to refresh his memory of her.

“I didn’t want to,” Ellert objected, and he sank back into the observation of the firmament.

“Alpha Cassiopeia is 120 light years away,” commented KaHe who sometimes showed a remarkable ability to empathize. “And Rho Cassiopeia is 740 the diameter of the sun. A yellowish supergiant.”

“The universe to astronomers,” said Walt as he took a sip of his whiskey. “Indeed, you were right...about the finish having a hint of oak.” He closed his eyes indulgently.

“Back then in Afghanistan, didn’t you...”

Walt yawned demonstratively. “Why should I bother you with old stories?”

“740 times the diameter... How am I supposed to imagine that?” asked Ellert.

“You aren’t. It’s not imaginable. The stars just aren’t made for humans.”

“I wonder where they come from?” asked Ellert, more to himself than the two men.

He had known the pair for some years. At the time, he had been doing research for HistoChannel TV on the Pashtuns and Afghanistan. Although both of them were considerably older than Ellert, who had been born in 2005, they’d become friends. Ellert hadn’t thought much of his skills as a journalist; in fact, he was too credulous for such a job. But he couldn’t make a living from historical work alone. The market was simply too densely populated for that.

Walt was German. He had only adopted the American variant of his name after his time in Afghanistan. KaHe’s real name was Herbert, but his use of a rather martial tone in many situations in life had earned him the “Ka,” which stood for *Kanonenboot*, or gunboat. Everything technical fascinated him. He was constantly tinkering with new inventions, with devices that made his house

and garden safer, his car faster, his 3-D sharper in depth.

Walt's relationship with machines, however, was marked by a good-humored lack of interest. If they were there and worked: great. If not, you could also breathe, drink, and do other nice things available to humans without them.

"Where who comes from?" Walt asked.

"The strangers. That Rhodan brought from the Moon," said Ellert. "Who are now sitting with him in the Gobi."

"They're from Hollywood," said KaHe. "A little E.T., a little Thor, a little Star Diver. The usual utopian cocktail. In the end, the great president of the great American people himself gets in an old F-22, flies to the Gobi, saves the Chinese's asses and is made emperor of China. Out of sheer gratitude, the Chinese forgive the USA all its debts. Cheers, rejoicing, ticker tape parade. Because, as Lenin said, 'Trust is good; confetti is better.'"

As always, he delivered his thoughts with utter conviction.

Walt rolled his eyes slightly and said, "Of course. Everything will be fine. Then all we have to do is see to it that the aliens march back unseen to the props room of Hollywood or Bollywood."

"In any case, they're not coming from Cassiopeia," said KaHe.

"Are you sure?"

The other man nodded. "Positive. We'll know soon enough. They're probably just negotiating which network they'll give their first interview to: the Chinese or the Indians."

"Or CNN," Walt added. "Or Al Jazeera."

"Or ZDF," offered Ellert.

Everybody laughed.

"Let's wait and see," Walt suggested, sipping again from his heavy glass.

“I’d like to know a little sooner,” Ellert replied.

KaHe pointed to Ellert’s pod. “Call Rhodan. Make an appointment.”

“No. I’ll do something totally different.”

“Call Maud and beg her to return,” suggested Walt. “On the way here, ask her to pick up the Han. And for you...” He examined KaHe thoughtfully. “Hm, maybe a cheeseburger?”

“Thanks! But I don’t eat with the mob.” KaHe refused with almost royal grandeur. “What did you say you’re going to do differently?” he asked Ellert.

“I’ll go and take a look at the future.”

What amazed him most was that neither KaHe nor Walt laughed, grinned, nor made jokes. Both looked at him thoughtfully. Walt put his glass down on the floor of the terrace.

“Explain that to us,” he said. “Does it have anything to do with your ‘forebodings’? Your weird dreams?

Ellert had imagined for years how it would be to let others completely in on his white dreams, not just—as he had done with Walt—leave it at vague hints.

At five or six years old, he had once asked his mother why some of the white dreams came true but the colored ones never did. Of course, back then he had assumed that everyone was experiencing this phenomenon. His mother’s at first blank, then worried look of incomprehension had led to him feeling that he was odd, and for a long time afterwards he hadn’t taken anyone into his confidence.

He had tried with Inken. If he had told her in advance about his other white dreams, would she have believed him?

No. She hadn’t wanted to believe him. White dreams did not happen in the universe of mechanical engineers. Only after Inken’s accidental death had he learned that not all his white dreams came true. Now and then, he managed to change the futures he’d seen

coming.

And Maud? Should he tell her about the dream in which they both sank into a nameless sea, faint and cold, an abysmal white depth beneath them? “What lunacy,” she would say. That was supposedly the reason he evaded all her advances? A *white* dream?

Yes, he would have to admit. *Our future would be death. I’m preventing that future. You live when we stay apart. That’s the condition.*

He hated those dreams. But the more he hated them, the more he had them. For years, he wished for his colorful dreams back. Dreams like anyone his age might have. Dreams of skin and hair and female closeness; of standing on a bridge and suddenly being able to fly; of not having any more wheat beer in the house and going to the nearest beverage store that turned out to be hopelessly labyrinthine, full of murderers and knifers—the kinds of dreams you simply washed out of your eyes in the morning.

Instead, there were more and more white ones, leaving him crushed in a bed wet with sweat. Burned out and almost starved, as if he had walked a hundred kilometers across the desert. And when he stepped on the scales, he had actually dropped five or six kilograms. The scales were the worst thing of all; they proved to him the strange reality of his dreams.

“About three years ago, I saw their ship crash on the Moon,” he told them. “That means, of course, that it was going to eventually crash on the Moon. It’s incredibly large. Something like an inhabited steel globe.”

“How large, exactly?” asked KaHe.

“I don’t know.”

Walt stared at him. “Did you see *them*? The crew?”

Ellert nodded.

“Describe them.”

Walt had leaned forward, elbows propped on his knees, hands folded. Concentrated. Matter-of-fact. The old logistician, who had not only swept *soccer ball-sized spiders* out of storage in Mazar-i-Sharif with a kick in the spider's ass when they straightened up on their hind legs and hissed, but who had run his thriving—if not entirely flawless—import-export business.

Ellert knew of Walt's escapades from his stories; the nightly tours across the ancient Soviet Bridge of Friendship to Termiz; his tradings with the Arabs and Russians, and, of course, with the Americans, whose Sikorsky Hurricane Makers—instead of making nonsensical empty flights—traveled as flying weekly markets, full of delicacies, drinks, and technical marvels that the U.S. commanders preferred not to know about. Those frustrated commanders whose cluelessness was available for a small fee.

"Describe them?" Ellert echoed thoughtfully. "They look like us. At least on the outside."

"Do their bodies share our proportions?" KaHe wanted to know. Ellert nodded. "And probably also our size, then. Their brains would hardly fit into pin-sized skulls. And they won't be giants either, otherwise their skeletons would have to be different; more compact. Draw them: the rooms, the curves of the hallways, then we can infer from that the perimeter of the ship and..."

"What are they like?" Walt interrupted. "You said on the outside, they're like us. But apart from that? On the inside?"

Ellert reflected. "They move like they're the kings of the world. Every world. Unapproachable and introverted."

"And what do they want on the Moon, of all places? To found a new kingdom?"

"They're shipwrecked. Something is wrong with their vessel. It crashed."

"What are they doing to get it back up and running?" KaHe asked.

“They…” Ellert closed his eyes and tried to remember the details of his white dream. The empty hallways. The deserted hangars where titanic auxiliary craft stood, deactivated, as if buried in oblivion. The strangers on their couches, absorbed in the virtual universes they’d created. “They’re doing nothing.”

“Nothing? In what way?” asked KaHe. “They can’t just be sitting on their high-tech thrones and waiting?”

“They’re playing.”

“Pardon me?”

“What are they playing?”

Ellert slowly shook his head. “Imaginary games. A mixture of military strategies, musical compositions; building fictitious worlds.”

KaHe laughed. “Sounds familiar. They’re probably here to stir up the podgames market.”

“That’s not quite it,” Ellert said. “The pod games are about landscapes, cities, on ten, maybe twenty levels. Their games are about galaxies. Empires. Plans that span thousands of years.”

KaHe smiled. “No fundamental difference. They’re a bit more advanced than we are. A bit more late Roman than our Rome.”

Walt looked at him pensively. “Let’s not get carried away.”

“Yes, let’s do just that,” replied KaHe with surprising vehemence. “This is an enormous chance for us. For humanity.”

“Said the inventor of the gunpowder, putting fire to the fuse of the powder keg he’s squatting on,” mocked Walt.

“And he was right about it!” Somewhat more meekly, KaHe added, “He should have just jumped up in time.”

“So, how long have you been capable of this?” Walt asked, changing the subject and looked at Ellert.

“Always.”

“Then you also dreamed about the Walking Man and the poor idiot who thought he was an astronaut?”

Ellert nodded.

“And what do you use that talent for?” asked KaHe. “You’re not playing the lottery or carrying it to the casino. Although...”

Ellert gazed thoughtfully at the light-enhanced starry sky. “I’d like to meet Rhodan,” he said. “Maybe I can help him.”

“With what? To make the desert arable? Or start a third world war?”

“Did you dream that you’d be with Rhodan?” asked Walt.

Ellert shook his head. “No. Not yet. But I could try.”

KaHe raised his eyebrows. “You can dream like that purposefully?”

“Sometimes,” said Ellert. “Previously, not at all. Now a little. It’s getting better.”

Walt picked up his glass from the floor and refilled it. Then he offered the bottle to KaHe. “Redbreast. Twelve-year-old Irish whiskey. You shouldn’t miss it.”

“I don’t miss a thing.” KaHe held out his glass.

Walt filled it to the brim.

Ellert closed his eyes.

Ellert looked down at the white land. He felt like he was sitting, but he didn’t know what on. Chair or rock, floor or carpet. At first glance, the land was always smooth, like an empty sheet of paper. Gradually, as if at his instruction, it became more detailed. Ground waves rose, other areas sank, formed sectors, pits, gorges, valleys.

From the center of the white land, buildings grew. There were towers, skyscrapers, but they differed from the uniform facades he had seen in Frankfurt, Manhattan, and Cairo. They were at the same time sky-high and deeply grounded with a non-intrusive elegance and simple beauty that needed no adornment.

Each of the white towers told its own tale, was of its own style, had something almost personal about it. Yet they all seemed saturated with human history. Human monuments that had been inhabited by entire generations. Thousands of people had been born in them, loved each other, produced and raised descendants, and died in them after long lives.

Ellert waited for the buildings to show their colors, for in some of his white dreams, the center gradually took on color, if only in gently pale tones, growing in presence and authenticity. However, these buildings stayed as they were because that was how they were meant to be.

The white city, thought Ellert. *The capital of the planet.*

At the outskirts of the city, spherical spacecraft rose up to the stars or sank back down to Earth at the end of light-years-long voyages. They floated in a surreal weightlessness and soundlessness, and this fantastic sensation made them seem even more credible. They resembled the ship that he had seen on the Moon, but on their metal shells he read the names of Earthly cities, countries—human names.

Ellert would have liked to stare at the city for longer. But something was changing underneath. He noticed the fine cracks only now. They were white, like the land, and therefore almost invisible. He wanted to deny their presence, but they couldn't be thought or dreamed away. They were hair-thin cracks at first, crawling like a destructive root system first over the floor of the city, then climbing up the towers with plant-like patience—an unyielding white ivy.

The cracks became fissures, then ever broader, ever deeper fractures, almost crevices. Appalled, Ellert saw how they broke the land into clods, wrecked the foundations of the towering apartment

buildings, ate into the towers.

Soon, the city had disappeared. Ellert saw nothing but the iron skeleton, the burnt and gutted wreck of the *Stardust.* He saw the tiny, charred corpses, the specialists of the Chinese army in their clunky, useless protective suits.

Strangely enough, the city had survived everything. It stood where it had stood before, removed from the destruction, exactly where the wreck of the *Stardust* was glowing.

Two futures, Ellert thought, amazed. *I see two possible futures at once, which contradict each other.*

He then spotted a tiny figure moving between the two worlds in this white land. Although the figure was so small, only a single man, the two worlds parted before him as if he were pushing a temporal wave in front of him. The white city flowed to the left, the wreck in the desert to the right.

I have to know who that man is, thought Ellert. *Rhodan?*

It took him great effort and it felt as if he'd have to peel himself out of his inert, trapped body, but he finally got closer to the lone wanderer.

The man's face was marked by the greatest pain, eyes clotted to slits, mouth open, sand-crusted lips under a dirty moustache, hair snarled with sweat. Still, he recognized the slender figure with the narrow face, the marked chin, the high cheekbones immediately.

He had seen it often enough in the mirror.

They had looked at him, startled. Walt had run into the kitchen and now came back with a pitcher of water. As Ellert drank, KaHe had to support his head. Then they helped him up. His whole body was trembling as the other two men supported him. In the bedroom, they pulled the drenched clothes off his body. Walt squeezed the shirt a little and looked stunned by the trickle running over his hands.

Ellert lay on the bed and caught his breath with his mouth wide open. His voice was a mere whiff of air.

“What’s he saying?” asked KaHe.

“Gobi,” translated Walt. “He wants to go to the Gobi.”

Ellert tried a nod.

“Such nonsense,” murmured KaHe. “In this condition.” Then as if getting a sudden urge, he started messing around with his pod. “Forget it,” he announced shortly after. “First, everything’s fully booked; second, the Chinese have largely sealed off Beijing. The Rhodan pilgrimage will be stopped at the airport.”

“Let me try,” said Walt. He pulled out his pod, connected it, and spoke cheerfully at first, then gradually more softly and insistently. And he spoke in Russian. At last, he finished the call.

“Nothing to be done?” asked KaHe.

Walt grinned. “There’s always something to be done. We’re flying over Moscow. From there to Hohhot. The rest…remains to be seen.”

“We?” croaked Ellert.

“Of course *we*,” said Walt. “Without us, you’d be hopelessly lost. Didn’t you see that in your dream?”

Ellert shook his head with difficulty.

“He has to keep working on his dreams,” KaHe added reproachfully. “And on his knowledge of human nature as well. Or did our off-duty crane operator really think we’d miss out on the adventure of the millennium?”

Walt grinned blithely. KaHe tapped his watch. The three hands and the hour markers lit up blue; only the marker for the XII glowed red.

“Still your old KHS?” asked Walt.

KaHe nodded. “Black Platoon. The Swiss reliability turned watch. When do we meet?”

“Tomorrow at 11:30 a.m. at the Munich Airport, and from there to Moscow.”

“Time’s running,” said KaHe.

Time’s running, Ellert thought. *But in which direction?*

In Moscow, they were picked up from Sheremetyevo Airport by a fellow in his mid-fifties who in Munich would have been described as a fine figure of a man. He was bald and wore a long, well-groomed beard that reached to his navel. He wrapped Walt in his arms.

“Dobre dien! Dolga ne vidilis. Kak dela?”

Walt replied enthusiastically in Russian, pointed at KaHe and Ellert, and said, “Eta moi drusya. No ani nemzi.”

The Russian laughed. “Pozhimu y net.”

“What’s he saying?” asked KaHe as he made an effort to out-grin the Russian.

“Leonid says that he’s overjoyed to see me but will keep a watchful eye on you,” lied Walt. “His name is Leonid Vsevolodovich Shchedrin, by the way.”

The Russian linked arms with Walt and navigated him through the crowds of the airport. They laughed and talked a lot, exclusively in Russian.

At some point they reached Leonid’s car in the parking lot—a lovingly maintained ZAZ Tavria that deserved to be called a “small car” like no other vehicle Ellert had ever ridden in.

The Russian opened the driver’s door, folded the seat back, and pushed and squeezed first KaHe, then Ellert into the back.

“I’ve always distrusted Russian cars,” confessed KaHe in a whisper.

Walt turned around and shouted loud enough to be heard over the engine noise, “Zaporozhets is not a Russian but a Ukrainian company.”

KaHe formulated a quick prayer.

Leonid drove them out of town. For some unknown reason, he had put a Russian pod with the elegant Lebedev design into the holder on the dashboard as a navigation aid. The satnav gave instructions that the Russian seemed to consistently ignore. He yelled at the device loudly, and hit and mauled it from time to time with his fist.

During one of his rants, Walt turned to Ellert and KaHe. “I met Leonid during my time in Afghanistan. Today he is a professor at the Spiritual Academy in the Trinity Monastery of Sergiev Posad.”

“Great,” said KaHe. “Is that where he got his driver’s license?”

“Why would he have a driver’s license?” laughed Walt. “He has a pilot’s license.”

“Heaven help us.”

“He took a day off. He arranged everything and will take us to Shchyolkovo.”

“To the military airport?”

“Didn’t you say that all civilian flights were fully booked?”

They drove about thirty kilometers to the northeast. Before they even reached the city, the Russian turned onto a road that led to the military airport. Their driver laughingly chatted with a soldier at the guard post while Walt, KaHe, and Ellert grinned and nodded vigorously. Then Leonid shook the man’s hand long and hard, and they were allowed to pass. If Ellert wasn’t mistaken, the handshake had been gilded with a few euro notes.

On the airfield stood a radiantly beautiful Tu-444: the legendary supersonic Tupolev.

“Who would have thought?” said KaHe. “Walt, I bow my head to you.”

But Leonid steered the Tavria in a wide arc away from the delta-winged marvel and headed for a remote runway. Ellert spotted a clearly aging Antonov there. If he understood the situation correctly, the plane would be flying military observers to Hohhot. There, they’d be quite close to the *Stardust*.

Leonid himself didn’t accompany them. He said goodbye to Walt with a warm hug, nodded briefly to KaHe, looked thoughtfully at Ellert for a while and then stretched out his hand to him. Ellert took it and smiled.

“May your journey be blessed, my son,” said Leonid in his roughly accented but impeccable German.

Then he got into his car and drove off. From the rolled-down window, he waved at them for a while longer.

Walt led them onto the aircraft. The other passengers greeted them politely but paid them no further attention.

KaHe examined the Russian military officers and journalists suspiciously. “They’ll probably open the cargo hatch halfway there and throw us off the plane,” he predicted.

“No doubt,” Walt grinned. “That’s the standard procedure.”

It was a long flight. The monotonous sounds of the engines, which rose and fell only rarely, made Ellert drift off. Soon, he was dreaming. At first, the dreams were mundane, colorful dreams. Then, as if struck by a never-ending chain of lightning, the landscape was decolorized.

He found himself underground. He was walking through a tunnel. The cracked earth of the tunnel walls was chalky white, opaque, but he knew that other tunnels were being driven through all around him. Some of these ran parallel to his own passage; some

crossed it a few meters higher or lower. The entire country seemed to have been burrowed under.

He couldn't see it, but knew that in the other passages, massive machines were driving through and that even more were coming in their wake. Mechanisms capable of killing people, destroying matter. Machines of inconceivable destructive power.

He sensed that Rhodan was nearby; close but out of reach. *Everyone should build a tunnel*, thought Ellert with the naturalness of thinking the most absurd things in dreams. He briefly had the impression that Rhodan could hear his thoughts, but the sensation quickly faded.

He walked, unperturbed. Suddenly, Rhodan stood in front of him. He wore a white one-piece suit, white boots, and on his head a white helmet that left only the face bare. On the left and right sides of the helmet, about ear-level, and on the top of his head, Ellert saw three spherical attachments. They were connected by a band, perhaps a semi-circular curved antenna. The glass visor was fully transparent; no shading, no streaks, no reflecting light.

From somewhere deep inside—inside of what?—he heard a murmur. He tried to understand the voice but found it difficult. It didn't sound unknown, yet at the same time it was strange, as if filled with a great fear.

"Until further notice."

He finally understood the words.

"What are you afraid of?" he heard Rhodan ask.

Then there was a great crash of thunder and a white flash that outshone everything and never went out again.

Ellert felt something rattle and shake him. It was an ordeal to open his eyes.

"What?" he asked Walt, who had grabbed him by the arm. "What are you saying?"

“I said, we’re there. Wake up, boy. Are you all right? You look ghastly.”

“Everything’s fine,” said Ellert, sitting up wearily as if his body were a broken mosaic he’d have to put back together.

Their plane was already taxiing to a standstill at Baita International, the Hohhot airport. Ellert looked at his watch, which was just adjusting to local time. It read 4.30 p.m., June 29. Sunday.

The airport entrance hall; its light front wall of glass; the pale, distant mountains; the blue sky, untarnished by clouds, reflected from the corridor floor. So much light; so much vastness.

Their short car drove into the city center. The Yin Mountains, the Green River: a city of millions. On the streets, Han and Tibetans, Daur, Manchu, Koreans. Walt raved about the Dazhao Temple, the wrestling competitions, the Xilituzhao Palace, the markets where you could buy (with a pointed look at Ellert) Mongolian silver jewelry as souvenirs for close acquaintances or (looking at KaHe) cashmere sweaters that “flattered even the most disadvantageous figure; deer antlers to camouflage the numerous bald spots on the head.”

Walt spoke of it as if he had seen it all before. Ellert and KaHu passed on a guided city tour. After the flight, they just wanted to go to bed.

“You slept on the plane, right?” Walt reminded them.

“Yes,” said Ellert. He didn’t mention that this dream had left him battered and drained.

The Phoenix was their hotel on Zhelimu Road.

Walt, softly, confidentially, asked, “Can we actually afford this? I know something smaller, more informal, more intimate.”

KaHe replied, “I know that you don’t.” Then, louder to the concierge, “I hope you accept VISA, sir?”

Walt and KaHe swam in the turquoise waters of the pool, and Ellert did his famous belly flop. Then came their dinner at Summit Steakhouse on the twenty-second floor of the hotel (Walt had studied the menu with the prices and turned a little pale).

"Can we afford this? I might know a Mongolian restaurant, familiar atmosphere, enchanting waitresses, authentic cuisine..."

KaHe simply said to the waiter, "Good evening, sir. Do you do Vienna Schnitzel? Yes, you do? Wonderful! A big one for me, with chips and krautsalat."

Their room was on the ninth floor with ocher and sand-colored carpets and wallpaper, and bedside lamps in the style of the lost GDR.

"We do sleep in separate beds, don't we?" asked Walt.

"Of course," KaHe answered. "Although you're missing out on something there. I'm a wolf in sheep's clothing."

This prompted emphatic eye-rolling from his friend. They shared an evening of TV together, Rhodan on all channels. The stunningly beautiful Chinese commentator had apparently been put into a sexual or religious trance by the drumfire of her army.

They surfed back and forth endlessly until they finally found a Rhodan-free program: an ancient *Simpsons* episode, although it was dubbed in Chinese.

Ellert finally wished them good night and went to his own room. The walk down the corridor suddenly seemed endless and sunken into the depths of the Earth, as if he could hear the distant crunch of the continental plates, the murmur of the magma in the guts of the planet. He escaped into his room and leaned his back against the door, breathing and breathing with his eyes wide open.

What's happening to me?

Deprived of Any Notion of Life and Death

On the morning of June 29, at 10 a.m. local time, they departed on a bus they had chartered with over thirty other travelers who wanted to go to the Gobi. Their bus passed through several military checkpoints; once, their driver argued loudly with a soldier who finally let him pass in the end. Ellert couldn't tell if the driver had bribed that guard or the others.

It took them two days to reach the restricted zone. In the early afternoon of July 1, 2036, a Tuesday, they arrived at one of the tent cities erected around the radiant dome in a half-moon arc, and got off the bus with the other passengers.

Walt grasped two of the foldable water canteens they'd emptied during the trip, slipped the bus driver a few bills, and took them. KaHe seemed to want to comment on that but simply gave a weary wave instead. They were all still paralyzed by the cold of the previous night and feeling knocked about by the bumpy ride. They hadn't gotten much sleep, only catnaps. So they'd lain there, the same sentences going around and around in their heads, the fragments of a melody, earworms against which they'd stopped struggling eventually.

Outside, they all stretched at the same time as if they were following some secret routine. The orientation of their eyes also seemed choreographed as they looked in unison to the south where the dome stretched out before them.

The shield of pure energy was less than two thousand meters away. It sparkled and lit up time and again like a diamond that an invisible hand twisted and turned in the light. An incessant rumbling and clattering, muffled by the distance, could be heard; an acoustic surge.

Everywhere in the camp, people with their pods followed the news distributed by CNN, Euronews, Al Jazeera, the Press Trust of India, and Xinhua.

They found a spot where no tent had been put up yet. Ellert and KaHe sat down on the ground. That seemed to be enough. People

who were also looking for a place in the tent city walked by and nodded to them. Shortly afterwards, KaHe had procured three light metal folding chairs, three still-wrapped warming blankets, and an insulated cooler bag.

Near them camped three women, apparently Dutch. The forty-, maybe fifty-year-olds waved them over. They had connected their pods. The screen, composed of three monitors, displayed the image with amazing clarity. Euronews showed the energy dome, but without the flashes of explosions and scattered light. Beneath the translucent shield, they saw the alien architecture expanding up towards the sky. Ellert didn't know how quickly time was compressed in this footage; whether he was seeing the real buildings or extrapolated models.

"Kandor," Walt said. "It looks like the Bottle City of Kandor, you know—Superman and the Fortress of Solitude."

KaHe nodded thoughtfully and said, "Walt, you're mad. There won't be any Superman flying in."

Their banter continued for a bit. One of the women looked Ellert over unabashedly.

"You're not saying anything," she remarked in a soft tone.

"What can I say?"

"I'm Renette Khokhobaia," she introduced herself, offering Ellert a remarkably slender, small hand. Her skin was dark, almost olive. Raven-feather hair, black eyes.

Ellert shook her hand gently. She laughed.

"Not so fragile. Squeeze." She let him feel her firm handshake. He reciprocated.

She introduced her two companions as Famke Asscher and Glennis van den Eekhout. Both had bright faces and light red hair. They looked like sisters, except that Famke had painted her mouth a raspberry red. All three spoke German, albeit with the slight variations typical of Dutch people. They offered to show the three

men around the camp.

The tent city had only existed for a few days, but it was surprisingly well structured. Renette Khokhobaia called the settlement *Harbor of Tents.*

The many folding tents, plastic igloos, tunnel tents, and teepees formed alleys, streets, intersections. Some paths ran towards squares where the Chinese army parked their trucks and dispensed water. Fruit, noodles, and rice were handed out from refrigerated tents. Some paid, while others took the food and drink as gifts.

Here and there, large foil screens were set up, showing news from around the world. Ellert briefly followed the English subtitles of an interview the Brazilian defense minister had given a reporter from Hinhua. Chiquinha Amorim warned the Chinese government against taking aggressive measures and praised the foresight of Secretary General Huang Hai-Jie, whom she called her friend.

Ellert lagged a little behind the group, trying to pick up bits and pieces of the conversations that were going on all around them. He wasn't sure what or whom he had actually expected. UFO believers, maybe; people who thought Rhodan or the Arkonide brought to Earth by him were the Messiah, the Mahdi, the reborn Elijah. German teachers with exquisite glasses, bored by their everyday lives, who wanted to hear the heralding of a new age, the Age of Aquarius, and who sweetened their stay in the desert with a little Chinese Bach flower therapy, with acupuncture, Qi flow regulation, tongue diagnosis, and moxibustion for the privately insured of Mother Earth. Thinkers, visionaries, Swedenborgians.

There was none of that.

What he heard in passing were fragments of discussions between physicists, computer scientists, and engineers talking about technologies that might allow the Arkonides to travel faster than light. He heard biologists and cosmologists discussing the possible physiology and anatomy of the aliens, about the conclusions that could be deduced from the fact that they breathed oxygen. He nodded to architects talking about what a star city should look like —the gateway to the heavens for a united humanity. How could a

new, democratic, flat hierarchy be expressed architecturally? How could the building styles of the nations and cultures merge? Or should they be preserved separately from each other? What model would the spaceports follow?

He heard economists debate economic concepts, journalists and doctors, and again and again, very practically oriented, grounded people—steel workers, craftsmen, and policemen, branch managers of grocery chains, plumbers, and painters, all of whom had nothing in common but the courage to set out in search of something new.

Like the European emigrants of the 18th and 19th centuries. The new pioneers of humanity.

"Where have you been?" he heard Renette Khokhobaia's voice ask him.

"Excuse me," said Ellert, "I've been lingering."

The word seemed to amuse her. "It's about time we got back to our tent."

"Yes."

She looked at him. "I wonder how it would work to 'bring you out of your tent'? Is that how you say it?"

He thought for a bit. "You mean bring me out of my shell?"

"Yes," she said. "Your shell."

Her eyes were really more than dark. He'd have liked to have given her some hope.

"I don't know," he confessed. "Sometimes I fear my tent has no exit."

"Helaas," she replied, smiling. "That's a pity."

They went back together. Walt and KaHe seemed enthused, and Famke Asscher and Glennis van den Eekhout did quite enough to add cheer to their spirits.

They reached the area where the three Dutchwomen had put up their tent. Khokhobaia introduced some other Europeans from their immediate neighborhood to them: Dutch, Danish, Belgians, a handful of Scots with whom Walt got along right away, and some young people dressed in fantasy uniforms, plus a quartet of young Arabs playing ancient Beatles songs on their instruments.

Khokhobaia assured them she would procure a tent for them. Not an hour later, she had fulfilled that promise. It was a flat tunnel tent with three parallel pole arches. KaHe and Walt, along with the Scotsmen Walt enlisted to help, hammered in the pegs. The work wasn't easy on the rocky ground, but remarkably, the Scots had mechanical help: they used a small pneumatic hammer.

"Where did you get that?" asked KaHe.

Liam, one of the Scots, winked, and in a low voice told them something about a small, maybe not quite legal market for this and that, run by some members of the great People's Army of the great Chinese people.

"Oh," said Walt. His eyes sparkled.

Their tent wasn't very wide and flat, but they could put the three loungers one behind the other and sit on them. Standing wasn't possible.

Ellert thought the dry warmth was rather pleasant, but it made him tired. Still, the babble of voices from the pods and the speakers of the foil screens prevented him from sleeping.

KaHe and Walt considered if and when the Chinese army would do something to stop the news coverage. The army had activated their interfering transmitters, but there were enough pod artists who were always just a tiny step ahead of the government's electronic efforts.

KaHe felt that these attempts had long been underway, but that the agencies had found ways to undermine the government and military efforts, pointing to a private Indian satellite, which,

notably, was equipped with high-tech Indian spy technology and owned by the Indian agency PTI. After all, there'd always be enough pod artists who would be just a single loophole ahead of the government's electronic efforts.

Walt laughed mockingly. In his opinion, no blurred image would leave the place, PTI satellite and listening drones notwithstanding, if commander Bai Jun or the general secretary no longer wished it to.

"Why should they wish it?" asked KaHe.

"Why 'they'?" Walt returned. "It's enough if one of the two wishes it and has the power to impose that wish."

"To secretly make propaganda for Rhodan," KaHe scoffed. "We know how many Perry Rhodan fan clubs exist in China. Which of the two would be the chairman of the national Perry Rhodan fan club, Bai Jun or the general secretary?"

Walt shrugged.

KaHe asked, "What do you think, Ernst?"

Ellert sat on his jacket, which he had spread out over a low-lying stone. "Nothing," he answered.

Later, KaHe and Walt set out once again. Walt carried the canteens. Thanks to the Dutchwomen, they now knew where to find water and food.

Ellert waited a little longer than an hour. He felt almost tipsy from the atmosphere in the camp. Everything happened so casually, was so unreal, a deceptive idyll. The tent city resembled a global army camp, but the army that was camping here, ready for action and in high spirits, was unarmed. It was supported by the real army of the Chinese, who gave generously, demanded nothing, but also sought no contact with the pilgrims...even avoided them. By order? Because of the poor communication possibilities?

At the same time, this generous army was fighting a battle, shooting and firing continuously at the energy dome, which was the

destination of most of the people here. The dome protected Rhodan and at the same time kept the pilgrims from reaching him.

Everything seemed to be up in the air. It was as if he were walking across a thin, transparent layer, a gauzy, glassy disc. Beneath him was the motionless, apparently peaceful ocean. In the deeper waters, however, were the patient shadows of large predatory fish.

Renette Khokhobaia came and stood next to him. They chatted a little about trivia, which cities they came from, and how the summer had gone in Europe: a catastrophe, of course; bone-dry and draining. Then there was the American corn mafia's advance on the EU agricultural market.

Ellert had the impression that she wanted to tell him something completely different. He saw her girlish hands glide through the air like peculiarly beautiful animals. He began to fear that that night, or whenever he found sleep, he'd have to dream of her, see her future, how her fabulously young hands wilted.

He'd try to avoid it. Otherwise, to what end had he gradually gained the ability to give direction to his dreams, to decide what he should dream of, what the visions should present to him?

Walt and KaHe came back, almost at the same time but from different directions. Renette nodded to him briefly and returned to her friends. The two men must have split up somewhere along the way.

Ellert could see that Walt was tired. His arms were shaking as he set down the canteens. The two giant bags of light blue polyethylene were filled to the brim with water. He turned the tap's red faucet and poured full three plastic cups that he'd conjured from his vest pocket.

They waved to the Dutchwomen and withdrew into their tent. KaHe opened the bag and showed it first to Ellert, then to Walt. Walt nodded appreciatively. There were Chinese-labeled noodle packages, self-heating canned goods—soups, according to the stamped label—some corned beef, and a pile of chocolate bars.

While the bars bore Chinese characters, their design (black wrapper, red label) was unmistakable: Mars Bars.

Ellert, Walt, and KaHe reached for them. KaHe tore the paper from a chocolate bar and spoke in a carrying voice.

“Mars is there, waiting to be eaten.”

Walt gave an agonized groan. “You would’ve made a good poet.”

“That’s true.”

Ellert had his arms folded at the nape of his neck. The Chinese lounger was surprisingly comfortable, the blanket surprisingly warm. It crackled ever so softly when he moved, like the remains of a fireplace. He guessed there was aluminum foil between the silk-thin layers of fabric.

KaHe and Walt continued to tease each other for a while longer, and Ellert listened to them with half an ear. Then he fell asleep.

Almost without transition, he found himself in a white dream. He stood on the border between two endless white surfaces. Slowly, he recognized what kind of surfaces they were. He was at the shore of an ocean. Behind him stretched a disturbingly large, flat land. He didn’t know which continent it was; all he knew was that the land behind his back was a desert. A hot land, the sparse plants barren and crippled. Somewhere, a scorpion crawled, he heard a fly buzz, then nothing.

All of a sudden, he was drenched in sweat. It was noon. It had to be 120 degrees. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky nor a single tree to cast shade. No wind was blowing. High, endlessly high and thin, motionless clouds loomed in the pale green sky.

Ellert looked out at the sea. Languorous waves rolled towards the beach as if in slow motion, like waves of gelatin. There was no sound of a surge; the shore was silent.

Ellert took a step backwards. His shoes detached heavily from a sticky mass. He bent down, wanting to touch the streaks, but backed off. What was rotting there under the blazing sun was an

ooze of decaying organic mass, the last residues of life.

He straightened himself, looking at the sea again, his eyes shielded with his hand like a prying stranger. The ocean was glassy and shimmered in an oily purple, indiscriminate from the shore to the horizon. No white-crested waves, no seagull, no ship.

This is the future of Earth, he thought. He waited. *Something must surely happen.*

And something did. A gas bubble burst from the sea and exploded with a loud noise. It stank of sulfur. The stench was infernal.

Ellert turned away. He walked for a bit through the silt. The noise of the gurgling surrounded him.. After a while, he thought he saw something ahead of him. He paused and squinted. Some distance away, on the shore, was a table where people were sitting.

With no real sense of urgency, he continued towards them.

There were two people eating. A black and white checkered cloth covered the table, hanging down to the ground on all sides. In the checks were small chunks of bread, sometimes with a meat paste, sometimes with vegetables. The two diners were scraggy and very old; one was white as ivory, the other dark.

Chess pieces, Ellert thought. But the two weren't fighting; instead, they were feeding each other the bread, which they took turns picking up from the tablecloth.

There was a connection between the two eaters and the dead sea, that much was clear to him, but he didn't know in what way, exactly, things were linked in this place.

Again, a foul bubble burst near the shore. The pair didn't seem to notice.

When he looked inland, he saw that there was a fire. The flames burst out of the naked Earth. Every now and then, it spluttered to all sides as if something might explode there. However, there was nothing to hear.

A man stepped out of the fire. He wiped away the flames from his face with an unwilling gesture. He didn't seem bothered that some drops of melted flesh were carried away with the embers. He had a purpose.

He strode towards the two men at the table. This man with the burnt face was, like the others, moving within the web of dependencies that was invisibly woven between all things here.

They're in danger, realized Ellert. The newcomer was pursuing a plan.

Ellert wanted to intervene. He stepped over to the table and said, *"Don't you see that you're in danger?"*

Neither of them reacted. Then the tablecloth was lifted, and an animal stuck his snout out. It was a kind of baboon. It looked at Ellert inquisitively.

Can you see me? he asked.

The animal didn't answer, of course.

Ellert squatted down. The baboon dared to come out a little farther. The tablecloth hung over his head and back like a hooded robe. He looked at Ellert motionlessly, directly in the eye. Ellert cautiously stretched out his hand and touched the monkey on the chin. It made small, unagitated noises. Ellert turned his head slightly towards the direction of the man from the fire.

Look at him. Danger. Escape.

The baboon broke free of his touch and came all the way out from under the table. With a jump, he was on the lap of the black man, standing up and shouting something into the diner's ear.

The man seemed to understand. He stood up slowly.

The dream came to an end.

Ellert woke with an excruciating thirst. He wanted to sit up but couldn't manage to do so. He croaked something out.

Walt came to his side immediately and handed him a bottle, which Ellert drank from greedily. The water flowed faster than he could swallow it, and it ran down his chin, into his moustache, dripping to the floor.

Wordlessly, he handed the bottle back and slept again, dreamless until dawn broke.

On the morning of July 2, there was a big breakfast. Walt had obtained—heaven knew how—eggs, bacon, butter, an autothermic pan, some oranges, salt, pepper, and warm croissants. Elations and ovations.

They ate.

Renette Khokhobaia felt chilly under a blanket; Glennis van den Eekhout kept stroking her red hair; Famke Asscher's red mouth glowed in the clear morning light. Liam and two of his Scottish pals laughed boisterously like knights before battle. They had brought along two young Americans who looked as if they'd gotten lost on their way to surf. College boys, Ellert guessed; the eternal Chucks and Bills. A short time later, they introduced themselves as Quirinio Minelli and Cirroc Lukather, the two leading quantum chromodynamicists at their elite university. As Ellert found out, they were just about to formulate a field theory in which the neutralization of gravity wasn't only theoretically possible, but was pushed to the very edge of practicability.

"And with Rhodan's help, we'll shortening the path to feasibility by one or two centuries."

Minelli waved over two svelte Africans who sat down with them and spoke in a quiet, clear English with an undefinable accent. Finally, they were joined by a thirty-or-so-year old Russian who could only be addressed by her first name, Oksana, and whose nose was constantly running. Her voice sounded smoky and uncertain, a colorful potpourri of English, German, and French bits. She even seemed to be able to converse with the Africans in their own regional language.

They talked about how hopeless their project was. Between them and Rhodan lay half of the Chinese army and behind the army was the force field.

“Even if the dome goes out,” Famke Asscher said thoughtfully, “it will be the Chinese soldiers going to Rhodan, not us.”

“Unless,” said Walt deliberately, “we have someone showing us the way. Past the soldiers.” He nodded encouragingly at Ellert.

Ellert shook his head. “Let’s wait and see. Something will come up.”

Walt, in an unexpectedly familiar gesture, put a hand on his shoulder. “Ernst,” he said. “This is all real. Unbelievable, unimaginable, but real. And all the dirty misery on this planet is real as well. If we’re being honest, we have to admit that it’s not looking good. This American pilot is taking a huge risk. He stands alone against an entire army, alien technology or not. He stands alone. And there are people here, a hundred thousand and more, who want to get to him. But they can’t find a way. Do you know of one?”

Ellert shook his head again. “How could I?”

Walt’s hand squeezed even tighter. “Ernst.”

“Is that true?” asked Renette. “You could help us?”

He hadn’t promised anything. He had asked them to leave him alone. He lay in the tent and closed his eyes. The fear that he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep turned out to be true and yet not. He slid into the white dream without having actually drifted off first.

He looked around. The land was white and deserted. But it was, without a doubt, the here and now. He saw the tent city, the salt lake. He saw the dome. And he saw the tanks and cannons and the blasts that were endlessly launched from them. Hadn’t he read somewhere recently that 2036 was the year of the dragon?

He concentrated. Gradually, he recognized the people. They

were like white shadows on a white background. He had to look closely. Renette's black eyes in her chalky face were the first clue. Little by little, the white crumbled away like brittle varnish. The world was taking on color.

Ellert held his breath. And why shouldn't he? In these parts, he didn't have to breathe.

He spotted Liam, the other two Scots, and Walt. They were talking to some uniformed Chinese man. Ellert watched a truck drive through the streets of the tent city. A cover obscured the loading area.

The truck stopped outside of the tent city at the banks of a lake next to a jeep with a trailer attached. Between the jeep and the truck was a group of twelve, fifteen people. He could make out Renette, Walt, KaHe, the other two Dutchwomen, Liam—their whole group. He found himself in the crowd as well.

The cover over the truck was pulled away, and a small crane was placed into the loading area. It was a machine whose purpose didn't disclose itself to him. On one side of it he saw two Chinese characters, the first simple, the second somewhat more complex. He memorized the symbols. Shortly afterwards, he saw a box on the trailer next to the machine.

The soldiers tapped their caps, got into the truck, and drove away. Ellert saw himself in the passenger seat of the jeep, with KaHe driving. The others were walking.

He skipped forward in time a bit. The jeep stopped next to a low, elongated stone formation. The rocky hill was about three hundred meters long, twenty meters high at most. Ellert pointed to a dark crack, and Liam drove the machine down a ramp from the trailer. He focused on the fissure in the rock. It was not so much a cave as a passage leading lower and lower, following a slight incline. Ellert knew where it led. If they followed it, this natural tunnel would lead them almost right below where the *Stardust* stood.

Ellert saw himself standing underground in front of a wall of pure energy. For a moment, he thought he was being reflected in

the alien shield. Then he realized that somebody was standing behind the force field.

The energy field opened.

Ellert watched the future for a while longer. Finally, he opened his eyes.

He remained in bed for five minutes, maybe longer. Then he got up and stepped out of the tent.

Walt saw him first and opened his eyes in shock. “Water!” he cried. “Give him water!”

Ellert reported what he had seen. He wrote down the two Chinese characters on a sheet of paper that Oksana gave him.

The Russian looked at them and said, “Lì and Zou. Lì means strength. You see a man with a spade. Man cut spade with strength. Zou means marching. See here how he swings his arms, one leg far ahead. What together, I don’t know.”

Ellert gave Walt the paper. He described the place where he had seen him with the Chinese soldiers. Liam knew what it meant and wanted to leave right away. He waved to his Scottish friends. Ellert drew the rock formation on the back of the paper.

KaHe left with Walt and the three Scots. About an hour later, he was back with a jeep and trailer. Walt and the Scots took a little longer, but they had finished everything as well by the time they got back.

“The Chinese will deliver tonight,” Walt told him. “You owe us.”

Ellert smiled. “Here and in the presence of witnesses: whatever I possess in cash, I hereby bequeath to you. Did everybody hear that?”

There was laughter and approval. Walt gave Ellert, who was sitting in front of him, a friendly pat on the back of the head.

“We’ll figure it out,” he assured him. Ellert nodded.

Shortly before 8 p.m. they reached the shore of the lake at the location Ellert had seen. Less than thirty minutes later, a truck from the Chinese army approached.

“So, this is the Lì Zou,” said KaHe. “A *strong marcher* indeed.”

He explained that they were dealing with a Chinese replica of a reliable Deilmann-Haniel machine that operated according to the Ilomäki-Ylöjärvi principle.

“I see,” said Walt.

“Of course,” said KaHe.

“Now *there’s* a guy who knows his stuff,” Walt teased.

“Maybe a little.” KaHe grinned and explained the operating principle of the more than head-high machine: its six steel drills in a circular array; how the resulting drilling waste could be conveyed by pressurized air to the protective pipes and then taken away; how and why the position and direction of the openings made it possible to create an ejector effect in the lap weld, namely in such a way that the drilling waste that had been able to pass the drill was also sucked into the protective pipe.

He pointed at the spray nozzles from which a fast-hardening supporting and sealing compound was sprayed onto the tunnel walls, and at such a high speed that the substance was condensed by the impact energy. With his foot, he tapped on one of the two wide caterpillar tracks, then he pointed at the part on the paneling behind, which had to be the electrical engine driving it. Ellert assumed that a conveyor belt could be connected to the back side to dispose of the drilling waste it ejected.

“Right,” said Liam.

The machine was about two meters high and well under two meters wide. It had a battery-powered electrical motor. In the box, the Chinese had not only included components for the conveyor

belt but also three operational batteries as well as a solar-panel-based recharging station, plus several canisters of the mass with which the ridges and the side walls of the tunnel were to be lined and stabilized.

They unloaded it right in front of the cave entrance. It was amazingly light. Its supporting parts consisted of several titanium alloys; Liam guessed aluminum, manganese, and the particularly corrosion-resistant zirconium. KaHe, on the other hand, assumed molybdenum because of the high melting point. Liam disagreed. Walt suggested that the two of them settle their dispute as men in front of the cave entrance by arm wrestling. Both declined.

From the cave entrance to the dome, the distance was not quite three and a half kilometers. The tunnel that Ellert had found seemed to bridge most of it.

“A strange coincidence,” KaHe remarked, rubbing his chin.

“Whereas coincidences are usually so logical and perfectly foreseeable,” Walt teased him.

“You have an explanation?”

“It’s obvious,” said Walt, astonished. “Ernst has been here before. A thousand years ago. In his dream, he traveled through a parallel universe and dug this tunnel a few millennia before our time.”

“Right, how could I overlook that?” KaHe answered scathingly.

Walt shrugged. “Well. Naive minds might have assumed, by the way, that tunnels like this were created by paleontologists digging for dinosaur skeletons. But we know better now.”

“Indeed,” said KaHe in a stentorian voice.

The Lì Zou rolled on its tracks at walking pace into the tunnel. Liam steered it with a remote control. After a bit more than an hour, he stopped in front of the rock wall. He and KaHe took another hour to attach the conveyor belt and get it operational. The other members of their group, apart from Ellert, had driven back to the camp with the jeep and trailer and appeared again after the first

trial run of the conveyor belt with their tents and supplies in hand.

Thirty minutes later, the move was done.

Ellert had spent that time sitting at the lake, looking motionlessly at the water whose supernatural blue had long been extinguished by the night. KaHe and Walt looked over at him. All they could see was his dark silhouette. Both had the feeling that they should go to Ellert, but both shied away from it. Or, if they were honest, shied away from being in close proximity to him.

“What about him? asked Renette, who had come out of her tent. “How did he know all this?”

“He dreamed it,” said Walt, earning a disapproving look from KaHe for it.

Renette laughed incredulously. “You’re joking.” She ran a hand through her black hair. “I’d like to have dreams that show me the future.”

“I don’t think so,” said Walt. “Not if you think the thing through.”

“If you want to, go to him,” KaHe encouraged her.

She hesitated. “I don’t know if I want that.”

“It would be nice if you did,” KaHe said softly. “I think he’s very lonely.”

Puzzled, Walt looked at him from the side. Then he grabbed KaHe by the elbow and pulled him over to the tunnel.

“Since we were just talking about dinosaurs,” he said, “I wanted to show you one or two in here.”

“You’ve always had such fabulous tunnel vision,” KaHe complimented him, following him inside.

Renette went to Ellert. He briefly looked up at her, and she sat down next to him.

“It’s very strange here,” she said. He nodded. “Why did you come here? To the Gobi?”

“From a certain perspective, I’ve always been here.”

She laughed. “You mean your destiny. Your mission. Your lot.”

He laughed back. “‘My lot.’ What strange words you know. It sounds like a Greek tragedy.”

They were silent for a while.

“I’m cold,” said Renette.

“‘*I’m cold,’* says the woman. The man takes off his jacket and puts it over her shoulders. She leans against the man. And so on.”

“You wouldn’t like it, this ‘and so on’?”

“I would.”

“But there is a *but?*” Ellert remained silent. Renette stood up. “They should be ready by now. Liam wants you to be there when the machine starts.”

Ellert nodded. He rose and went into the tunnel.

It wasn’t yet midnight, still July 2, when the Lì Zou started its strong march into the Earth. The noise that the drilling machine made was surprisingly limited.

Two days later, on the morning of July 4, 2036, they ran out of supporting compound. That was no problem for Walt. By noon, the Chinese army had already resupplied them, and with such a big greeting and waving and hugging that KaHe grew quite nervous.

“Why don’t you just take a megaphone and shout it to the Chinese: friends, we are building an alternative to the official tunnels you are constructing. Come and cheer with us!”

Walt pondered the suggestion. “Fine,” he said, nodding.

“Excellent idea. Unfortunately, my Chinese is very poor.”

Ellert stayed away from them most of the time. But even when he stood by the machine or helped at the end of the conveyor to transport the rubble away, he seemed indeterminably distant.

In the evening, he sat by the lake again, and again, Renette joined him.

“I brought a jacket tonight,” she said. “No worries.”

He nodded without looking at her. She sat down and noticed that he had his eyes closed.

“We’re making good progress, aren’t we?” He nodded. “Then won’t we eventually end up where the Arkonides have set up their energy shield?”

He nodded.

“And then?”

When he turned his face to her, Renette thought she didn’t see Ellert but rather a statue representing him in a strange way. He spoke so softly that she could hardly understand him.

“Those who wander beyond don’t believe in obstacles.”

Against her will, she became angry. “What do you mean by that? We come, knock, and Rhodan opens the door for us?” He nodded. She wanted to reciprocate, but Ellert’s gesture had left her defenseless, even completely convinced her. “You’re crazy,” she murmured.

He had already closed his eyes again.

Back in the tunnel, Liam asked her, “What did he say?”

“That we…that Rhodan is waiting for us.”

“Is he serious?”

“He’s serious,” she said. “And he’s right.”

KaHe and Walt looked at each other silently. It was as if they and the rest of the group were fading into vague figures.

The Lì Zou drilled ahead.

Liam and one of his Scottish friends kept the night watch by the working machine. The next day was a Sunday, July 6, 2036. Shortly before six o’clock, Liam stopped the Lì Zou. According to the calculations of Cirroc Lukather and Quirinio Minelli, who were knowledgeable in physics, and not only at the quantum level, the drill stood right in front of the energy wall.

They went to wake up the others. Ellert was already coming towards them in the tunnel. He passed them without a greeting.

“He’s a madman,” said Minelli. “Mad as a hatter. Complete lunatic.”

“Yes, that’s what he is,” Lukather replied. “And us, we are his true followers.”

Shortly afterwards, Ellert stood motionless beside the machine. Between it and the right side wall, there was a space of perhaps thirty or forty centimeters.

Renette Khokhobaia stayed far in the background. Liam pointed out that it could be dangerous to let the machine continue drilling.

“You can leave the tunnel,” Ellert offered in a soft voice. “But it’s not necessary.”

Walt nodded to Liam. The Scot pressed the start button of the remote control.

The drills started moving again.

At half past six in the morning, one of the Arkonide robots woke Rhodan up. He opened his eyes.

“Good morning,” he mumbled.

“I am not qualified to judge,” said the robot. “Ethical judgements do not work for me.”

Rhodan sat up and swung his legs off the chair. “Too bad,” he said after glancing at his watch. “Otherwise you’d know how immoral it is to rouse someone from their sleep so early.”

“You asked me to tell you when the tunnel you asked us to build reached the interface with the dome,” said the robot. “I am hereby reporting as requested.”

Rhodan nodded. He himself still didn’t understand why he’d commissioned the tunnel in the first place. For a moment, he was glad that Bull wasn’t there. His friend wouldn’t have denied himself some snappy comment or other on the irrational excavation project.

“You dreamed about *building a tunnel? Oh, yes, I understand. What exactly will the robots have to do when you dream of a casino? Or of Hogwarts? Do me a favor*: *if you ever dream again, think of a supermarket full of pretty girls at the cash registers, okay?”*

Rhodan ate a snack and had something to drink, then he followed the robot into the tunnel. Another machine joined them.

A while later, they stood at the end of the passageway. In the artificial light, the energy field seemed like a streaky water surface.

“Do you have new orders?

Rhodan thought briefly. “Activate a structural gap in the shield.”

The two robots said, completely in sync, “The managing positronic considers a structural gap a risk.”

Rhodan nodded. He shared that opinion. “Activate it anyway.”

The dome faded, and Rhodan waited. He thought he could hear the sound of a drilling machine, but maybe it was only a distorted echo of the detonations over the force field.

“We are locating bio impulses behind the end of the tunnel,” the robots reported.

The Chinese, thought Rhodan. *It must be. Right?*

“Keep the structural gap open.”

The walls started to vibrate almost imperceptibly, then the sensation grew stronger. It crumbled. Then it suddenly collapsed.

KaHe and Walt swallowed. The others were quiet as well, some even holding their breath. In front of them, in a brightly lit passage, stood two other machines. They had nothing in common with the Lì Zou, however, but seemed like embodiments of a strange, far more advanced technology—elegantly, almost gracefully designed, powerful and substantial. Their bodies rested on a double-curved, slender column that ended in a discus-shaped base. It was possible that pulleys or chains lay hidden beneath the disc. It was also possible that the machines floated. Four metallic yet flexible tentacles extended from each of their upper bodies. The upper two tentacles ended in openings within which a faint greenish light glowed. The lower ones had ends that resembled the vents on vacuum cleaner hoses.

Ellert noticed that the walls of the other tunnel looked glazed. The machines moved soundlessly a foot or two to the side and made way for the man waiting behind them.

Perry Rhodan stepped into view.

At the same time, Ellert had stepped forward as well. Without hesitation, the others had let him go ahead.

Rhodan looked at Ellert attentively and with unconcealed curiosity, and raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“My name is Ernst Ellert.”

“Guten Tag,” Rhodan responded in German, recognizing the accent. He smiled, and his curiosity grew visibly.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have much time,” said Ellert, smiling back hastily. “At least, it appears that way.”

“But appearances are deceiving?” guessed Rhodan.

Ellert nodded. “They are. I ask you not to leave me here. Take this”—he tapped his chest—“into your custody.” He tried to smile once more, but his face was stiff with tension. “For the time being.”

“What are you afraid of?” Rhodan asked.

Suddenly, the walls far behind Ellert and the other tunnel-builders burst. Soldiers rushed in, shouting commands in both Chinese and English. They charged forward, guns at the ready, straight past the drilling machine, pushing aside Oksana, Liam, Renette, and the others who were standing between them and Ellert, Rhodan, and the robots.

The Positronic that was in contact with the robots reacted and closed the structural gap in the defensive shield. Ellert stood exactly where the energy converged. He saw it become light around him.

His body was catapulted to the side of the tunnel where Rhodan stood, and then his consciousness faded away.

One of the soldiers pressed his hand against a tiny speaker in his ear. “Yes,” he said. “I saw Rhodan.” He listened to Bai Jun’s response. “Everything was just as you thought.” He listened again. “No. We were just a few moments late. I’m sorry.” Another pause. “Yes. Probably one dead man. But we don’t have to take responsibility for that. Rhodan killed him with his energy dome. Pardon? No. We can’t. The body is beyond, on Rhodan’s side. I’m coming back now.”

The machines had moved Ellert’s body to Rhodan’s underground quarters. The man seemed outwardly unharmed, but Rhodan couldn’t feel a pulse or a breath.

“Is he alive?” he asked one of the robots.

“I don’t know,” the machine replied. “His condition defies my concepts of life and death.”